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THE EARTH OF NENKUNAL

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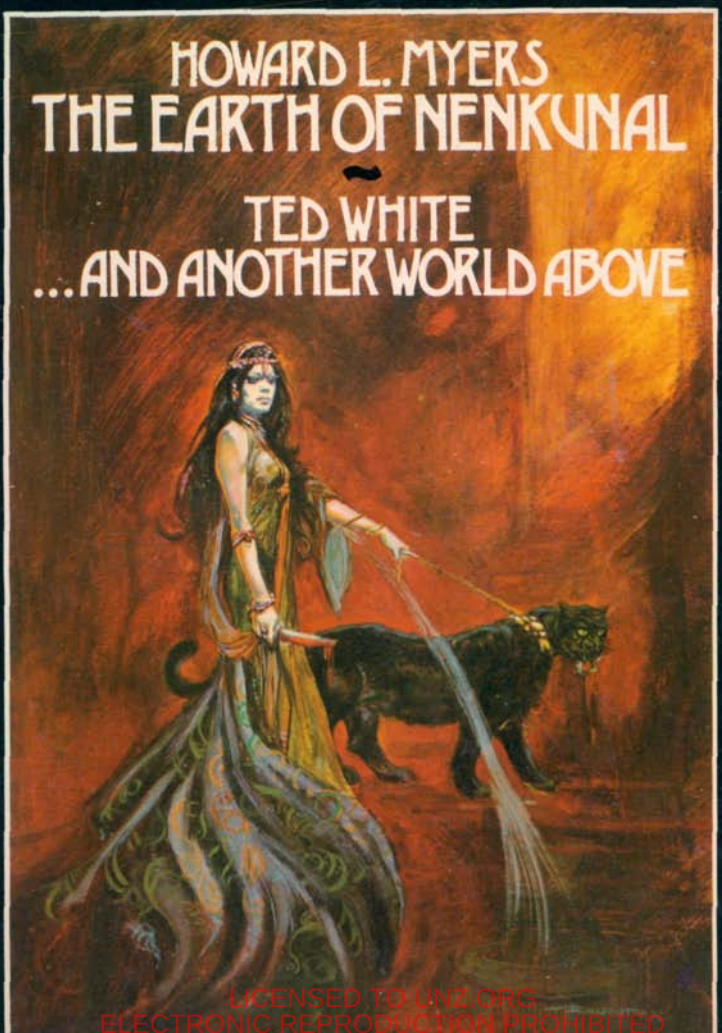

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JANUARY, 1974 Vol. 23, No. 2

THE EARTH OF NENKUNAL, a complete new short novel, by **HOWARD L. MEYERS** 6

new novelete

. . . AND ANOTHER WORLD ABOVE
by **TED WHITE** 52

new short stories

ALIEN
by **DAVID R. BUNCH** 50

SHE-BEAR
by **JANET FOX** 76

THE INTERVIEW
by **J. J. RUSS** 87

NETWORK
by **BARRY N. MALZBERG** 98

HEARTBURN IN HEAVEN
by **SUSAN DOENIM** 106

new features

EDITORIAL by **TED WHITE** 4

ACCORDING TO YOU 119

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TED WHITE

editorial

THE RECENT MAIL brought a letter from John Schmidt of Amarillo, Texas, which bears quoting:

Mr. Ted White:

I want more. After reading a couple of stories, the only short stories in the June, 1973, AMAZING, I wanted more, but there was nothing but two serials already started. I don't like serials anyway, and less now.

So I turned to the April FANTASTIC, and found four short stories. Unprecedented. And a novelet!

But that didn't hold me long so I went back to *If* for April, 1973, and stories I had read. There were two short stories, a novelet, a novella, and a serial conclusion (boo!).

About the same time I was reading mystery stories. Ellery Queen's to be exact. And in *one* of his magazines I found as many stories as the three sf mags combined (if you cut off a serial, and you can with my say so any day!)! And in Hitchcock's mystery mag there were thirteen stories too, plus a novelet. And, in the EQ anthology of Summer-Spring 1973 (a $1.50 cover price) there were: nine short stories, four novelets, and two short novels.

The point I'm trying to make is that for a little more money—does 75¢ as the mystery mags sound fine?—could we not get more words? I know, a lot of people like serials (and soap operas—that should get some letters) but a lot don't, or like short stories more. And everybody would like more.

Now that I'm off my soap box and out of reading material I am forced to go down to the library (I've read all the sf) and memorize the fantasy on the bathroom wall. See how desperate I am?

I want more. (More or less.)

JOHN SCHMIDT
7865 Canyon Dr.
Amarillo, Texas, 79110

JOHN RAISES SEVERAL POINTS here which deserve attention. Let's deal with them one at a time.

First, wordage vs. stories.

The plain and simple fact of the matter is that both the April FANTASTIC and the June AMAZING had the same amount of fiction. Although in FANTASTIC it was divided

(cont. on page 115)

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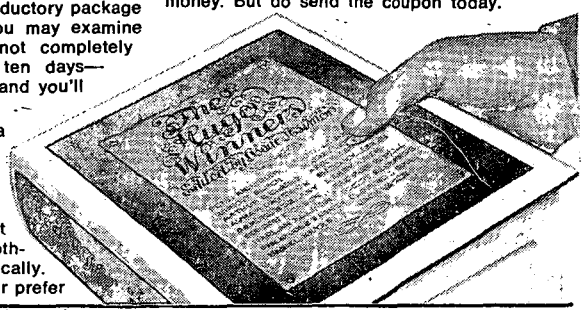

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Howard Myers' last appearance here under his own name was the novelette, "Psychivore" (June, 1970), although under the name he had previously used ("Verge Foray") he published "Bowerbird" in our February, 1971, issue. Under either name he has been absent from these pages for far too long and we welcome him back with a novella about Basdon the Bloodshot, a fighting man who finds himself allied with a precocious girl and an old wizard in the battle against the god-warriors for—

THE EARTH OF NENKUNAL

HOWARD L. MEYERS

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

I.

THE INN WAS COOL, and the wine in the cup of Basdon the Bloodshot was potent and sweet. He drank and smiled—politely though grimly—at the joking exchanges of the graingrowers sitting with him. They, after all, were paying for his wine.

"And anything else you want, good swordsman!" the largest of the farmers bellowed, slapping him on the back. "You served us well today, and by all that's devious we'll see you served no worse tonight! Ho there, Keep!"

The thick-middled man in the apron turned. "What, Jarno?"

"Me and the lads will get along to our own diggings after a cup or three," the farmer Jarno told him. "But our good friend the swordsman Basdon stays tonight. You tend him well, and we'll pay."

The aproned man nodded and looked curiously at Basdon. "Fair enough," he agreed, waddling closer with his gaze still on Basdon. "Might I ask, stranger, how got you in the good graces of Jarno and his bucolic cronies?"

"He found five graves we would have missed!" bellowed Jarno.

The aproned man frowned. "Out in the Narrowneck ground?" he asked.

"That's right. Them god-war-

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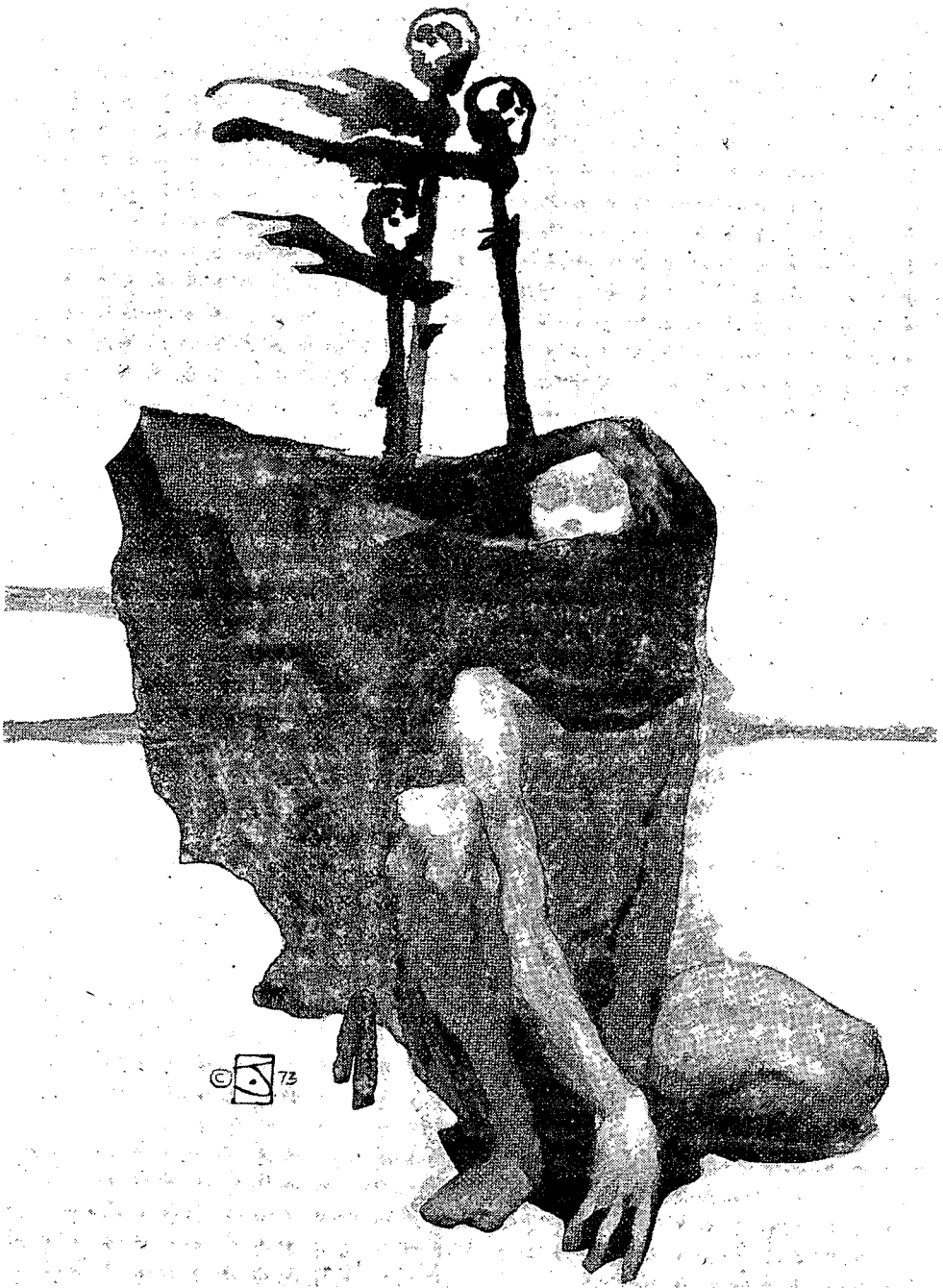

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riors got tricky, I guess," one of the other graingrowers chimed in. "They must have chopped the holes through the roots of a young chestnut tree. In five years, the roots grew back, to cover the bodies in the ground beneath. We couldn't snout them at all."

"But Basdon could!" said Jarno, giving the swordsman another slap on the back. "What's more than that, he got off his horse and helped us dig them out and burn them. You'd think a swordsman would be too snooty to dirty his hands with hard work. But not Basdon!"

His eyes still studying Basdon, the apron man asked Jarno, "Could you recognize any of the bodies?"

"No. All five were grown men, and there was nothing to identify them. Basdon figures they could be god-warriors."

"Oh? My name is Jonker, swordsman. For a fighting man, you must be a bit of a magician to snout those bodies underneath living roots."

Basdon sipped from his cup. "A bit," he said, looking at his wine.

"And you think they were god-warriors?"

Basdon shrugged. "No magic in that guess. The god-warriors bury all the dead, because that's in keeping with their beliefs. But they would be most concerned for their own, so they would be most likely to bury them where they would *stay* buried." He saw the innkeeper Jonker was frowning uncertainly, so he added, "I know it's hard to follow the way they think, but to them a buried body is not an invitation to the first necromancer who comes along to enslave the body's soul. To them, burial is safe, and the worst thing that could happen to a body of a fallen comrade would be unearthing it. That would disturb the sleep of the soul."

Jonker nodded slowly. "Right you are, swordsman, now that I think it through."

"This talk of god-business gives me the shivers," one of the men complained uneasily. "It's bad enough to spend a day a week out there undoing the filthy work of those accursed worshippers. We do it, because it's our duty. But we don't have to gab about it all evening!"

Jonker chuckled, then said, "It's not very appetizing pre-supper conversation, I agree. How's the wine, swordsman?"

"Very tasty, and with bite," Basdon replied. "I haven't tasted better anywhere in Nenkunal."

Jonker looked pleased. "I spelled it myself. And as the results demonstrate, I'm not without magical ability."

A couple of the graingrowers snorted and one said jokingly, "A top-grade magi, that's our Jonker, all right."

Basdon gathered that Jonker's pretensions in The Art were

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something of a standing joke. Which was a comforting thought, even though Basdon's personal secrets were protected by spells. Jonker's penetrating look had made the swordsman uneasy.

Attention turned to a bit of by-play between Jarno and the serving girl, who was trying to sit on the big man's lap.

"Go perch your pretty bottom elsewhere, Suni!" he growled unhappily. "A man's got his limits!"

"Ho, Jarno's getting old!" jibed one of the farmers.

"No, just sensible," Jarno denied angrily. "My wife's niece is staying with me while my wife's birthing, and she's an ardent and demanding piece. She would knot my head if I came home with no desire for her!" He gave the girl a shove. "Go perch on the swordsman, wench! He's a handsome stag, and with ardor to spare!"

Suni turned to study Basdon. "So he is," she giggled.

Basdon had paid her little heed before, but as she came toward him he looked her over. She was a shapely lass with a face of carefree prettiness rather than beauty. He put down his wine and opened his arms to her as she sat down on his lap.

She stroked his stubbled cheek, then kissed him on the mouth with the full lack of restraint of a healthy-minded woman. His thought of Belissa was only a brief, hurting flick across his brain, quickly crowded out by the lush wench in his arms, though his eyes burned sorely.

"Ho, the swordsman will content you!" guffawed Jarno approvingly.

"He'll content her only for as long as it takes," observed another. "Suni's no babe to be soothed through the night by a milkless pacifier."

The girl worked her skirt out from under her, and Basdon's exploring hands found much to approve in her structural details. Suddenly he lifted her onto the table, as the farmers hastily rescued their cups and the flagon, and climbed up with her.

She made a lively match of it, constantly wriggling and straining against him while she moaned and giggled into his mouth. Basdon was through all too quickly for her pleasure. But as he stood up and adjusted his clothes one of the younger graingrowers moved quickly to take his place with the girl. The others shouted their approval and three of them began casting lots for the next turn.

Basdon sat down and recovered his cup from the floor and refilled it. Belissa was strong in his mind now, depressing him bitterly. She had been so different from this lusty lass Suni . . . so damnably different.

Jarno touched him on the

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shoulder. "Watching this discomfits me," he said, flicking a thumb toward the pair on the table. "I must depart for home in haste. But remember you have a friend in this valley, swordsman, if you pass this way again."

"That I will, Jarno," said Basdon. They touched each other's foreheads, and the big graingrower hurried out the door.

Moodily he watched the sporting on the table while he nursed his wine. Presently Jonker told him supper was prepared, and guided him to a table in a quieter corner of the room. The graingrowers soon departed, shouting goodbyes to him and promises of future visits to Suni. The girl also found reason to leave the room.

In the quiet, Jonker came to have wine with his guest.

"Not often in these unsettled times does a man of arms find comradeship among tillers of the soil," he remarked. "I'm pleased to see it happen. It reminds me of calmer days."

"Perhaps those days are returning," said Basdon.

Jonker shook his head. "All that is finished. The god-warriors will return, more numerous, time and again, until finally they will come to stay. Here and everywhere. They are the wave of the future."

"I think not," Basdon countered. "The god-warriors are . . . are afflicted with a soreness of the mind. Some will die of this affliction, and others will heal. That is the way with sicknesses, is it not?"

"With most sicknesses, yes. Not this one." Jonker gulped his wine while staring at Basdon. "Swordsman, you cannot judge the full course of this affliction upon the world by the course it has taken in you. And you must see that, while you seem to be a special case, your recovery is not complete."

Basdon tensed, prepared to come to his feet with sword in hand. But the innkeeper made no move other than to lift his cup. Although he had so much as said he recognized Basdon as a god-warrior . . .

Jonker said softly, "The age of the magical arts draws to a close, swordsman. This earth now faces an age of superstition, of *religion*, as the leaders of the god-warriors are beginning to call it. This will endure nigh twenty thousand years before The Art begins its slow recovery."

"You speak as one who knows," Basdon commented tightly.

"I was not always an innkeeper, swordsman. Nor were countrymen always encouraged to regard my abilities as a matter for laughter. Yes, I speak as one who knows."

"Then why don't you *use* your knowledge?" Basdon demanded. "If you have The Art, employ it against the . . . the enemy."

Jonker shrugged. "That would be futile. We must be overwhelmed.

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The earth is not the only world, swordsman. It is one among many. The starry sky is filled with worlds, and the powers of magic span the gulfs between. Only of late those powers have turned to darkness—to necromancy on a scale that makes our own black-spellers seem prankish children by comparison. That is the power behind the god-warriors, swordsman, the power of universal necromancy! We are all but helpless in the face of such strength."

Basdon was shaping a question when the innkeeper signaled him to silence, and Basdon saw that Suni was re-entering the room. "I will go see to your bed, swordsman," said Jonker, rising. He went out, and after a moment Suni came over and took the chair he had vacated. She regarded the swordsman with large blue eyes that were still interested, but now a trifle sleepy.

"You are a hasty man, Basdon," she murmured. "If you are equally swift with your sword, your enemies must die with merciful suddenness."

"My apologies," he replied. "I have travelled far and seldom meet such hospitality as you offered, so I fear I was inconsiderate . . ."

"You can make amends," she giggled. "I was wondering: Is it the dust of the roads that reddens your eyes?"

"Perhaps so," he replied, blinking rapidly now that his attention had been called to the ever-present but slight burning in his eyes.

"Basdon . . . Basdon the Bloodshot!" she laughed.

He flinched. Why did everyone hit upon that naming for him, even on the briefest acquaintance? It was irritating.

"It's but a trivial imperfection," the girl said hastily, seeing his annoyance, "and the only one I noticed . . . other than your haste, of course."

He smiled. "The haste, if not the redness of eye, can be considered cured."

Jonker returned. "Your room is ready, swordsman. I believe you will find the bed comfortable and . . ." he glanced at Suni ". . . large. But if the day has not left you too exhausted, perhaps you would honor me with an hour of conversation in my private quarters?"

Basdon nodded, smiled at Suni, and followed the innkeeper from the room. They passed along a dark hallway and down some stairs, the flickering lamp carried by Jonker revealing little more than the walls and the dusty night-light fixtures, which had not glowed since their operational spell had failed shortly before the god-warrior raiding began.

Having realized Jonker was more than he seemed, Basdon was not surprised to see subtle indications in the man's quarters that The Art

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was far from dead here. There was a general cleanliness in the appearance of the furnishings. The light from the lamp, which Jonker placed on a central table, seemed amplified by the brightness of the walls. A sense of ease that could not be attributed to the wine, the girl, and the good supper came over the swordsman as soon as they entered.

But he was determined not to be gulled into an overly relaxed condition, which he guessed was Jonker's intention. He took the offered chair, letting his right hand rest casually on the hilt of his weapon.

"I am curious about the god-warriors," said Jonker, seating himself comfortably on a lounging chair.

"Seemingly you know more of them than I," Basdon parried.

"In some respects, yes. But I have not lived among them, have not been one of them. I don't know how they respond, as individual men, to the geas of universal necromancy. Nor how they differ in particular personal traits from a man such as Jarno, for example."

"You think I can tell you that?" asked Basdon. "You are suggesting that I've been a god-warrior?"

Jonker shrugged. "You know what you've been, perhaps better than you know what you are now. And I know what I see in you, especially in your reddened eyes. Why deny it?"

Basdon grimaced. "Very well," he conceded. "But I paid dearly for the casting of a concealment over my mind, which should have protected my secrets from the gaze of a magician."

"Few casts and spells endure these days, and yours was probably done by a practioner of mediocre skill," said Jonker.

For a moment Basdon considered his situation in silence. Jonker obviously knew him for what he was . . . an enemy. But, no, that was not what he really was. True he had been an enemy, a god-warrior, but no longer, and Jonker knew that as well. And the innkeeper had revealed nothing in the presence of the graingrowers, who among them could have easily done their will with a lone swordsman . . . So the magician had passed up the best opportunity to take vengeance on him for all the harm that—

Basdon frowned. He found it difficult to keep in mind that vengeance was seldom a motivation in Nenkunal. Only those, like himself, who had grown up in the new culture of religion rather than the old of magic tended to consider a man a lifelong enemy on the basis of one injury done. To Jonker, an enemy would be he who threatened future hurt, not one who had inflicted past hurt. So probably the innkeeper meant him no harm.

Without preamble, he answered the magician's question. "The god-warriors differ from a man like

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Jarno by being burdened with discontent. They differ among themselves in the things they are discontent about. Some worry about whether the gods attend their worship. Others are troubled because their fellows do not give them the positions and honors they feel they deserve. But most . . ." Basdon hesitated, then finished, ". . . most are troubled by women, either a woman who won't be theirs or a woman who is theirs but whose actions displease them."

"Ah," said the magician. "And the women?"

"They are much the same as the men," said Basdon. "Easily irked for reasons difficult to comprehend, seldom at ease with a man. The religion doubtless has something to do with that. It teaches that a woman's body is at the same time filthy and sacred. This must confuse them, but they seldom admit confusion."

"Then a girl of the worshippers would not be likely to entertain men in the manner that Suni entertained you and the grain-growers," mused Jonker.

"Some few might," Basdon replied uncertainly. "They would be those not convinced that their bodies were sacred, but who were sure they were filthy. I'm not sure that even those would couple while others watched. In the city of Vestim, for one example, a girl who behaved like Suni would be reviled by all, probably beaten to death by the other women."

With a glint of amusement, Jonker asked, "And how do *you* regard Suni?"

Basdon frowned, and shook his head. "Well, I know she's a fine, loving lass, but what I *feel* doesn't quite fit with what I know. I can't respect her, though I should."

"Fundamentally, then, sex is dirty," said the magician.

"It comes down to that," Basdon nodded.

"And what of your own woman?"

Pain bit at Basdon's mind, and he rubbed his burning eyes. "She is . . . she's one of those who considers her body very sacred. The last words I spoke to her, and angry words they were, was that she thought herself too good for any man, that only a god would be worthy of her."

"But this woman was not your only source of discontent," said Jonker. "If that were the case, you could hardly have enjoyed Suni with such enthusiasm, and so openly."

"That's true, perhaps," agreed the swordsman. "I think my real problem is that I don't quite believe in the gods."

The magician laughed. "Or that you don't quite disbelieve in them."

"Yes."

"You were one of the legion of god-warriors who engaged in the battle at Narrowneck five years

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ago," stated Jonker.

Basdon lowered his head and nodded. "The Art enables you to read that in me?"

"Partly. But mostly I guessed it through ordinary reasoning. You found the graves under the chestnut roots. No god-warrior is sufficiently free of universal necromancy to do that by snouting. You had to know those bodies were buried there."

"I helped cut the holes," said Basdon, his eyes clenched shut. "Then last year, when I saw at last that my desire for the woman—she is called Belissa—when I saw it was fruitless, I deserted the warriors and set out to retrace the route my legion had followed. I hoped that, here and there, along the way, I might be able to make some amend of the harm we had wrought. As I did today at Narrowneck."

The magician shrugged. "It matters little now whether bodies are burned or buried. The necromancers out there"—he pointed a thumb toward the sky—"will see to it that all souls meet the same fate. Your pilgrimage is honorable, but futile."

Basdon leaped to his feet to pace the room angrily. "Then why do you keep on living, magician, since to you *everything* seems hopeless?" he shouted. "You say the age of magic is dead, that the sickness of religion is going to overwhelm us all, that fighting back is useless! Then what keeps you going, magician?"

"Perhaps I would keep my spirit free a few years longer, as long as this body holds together," Jonker replied softly. "Also, there is still something needful of being done."

"What can be done, if all is lost?" Basdon demanded.

"You may recall that I said, while you were dining, that the age of religion would endure twenty thousand years, before man would begin to pull free of the tiring necromancers and a new era of magic would start its growth. My greatest ability in The Art is to see such distant matters with some clarity, if one considers twenty thousand years distant. It really is little more than a moment in the total span of a soul's existence.

"In any event, there will come a moment, in the advance of the new era of magic, when The New Art will be imperiled by its own incompleteness. Men will have learned many important but elementary traits of gross matter and motion. Such as being able to mark out with great precision the path that a thrown object will follow—trivialities no present-day magician would concern himself with.

"The demi-magicians of the future will interest themselves almost exclusively in such pursuits, because the lingering necromancy will block what few efforts are made to examine the nature and

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abilities of the human spirit. Those who look will usually see nothing but a peculiar obsession with sex—which, as you and I know, will be no basic trait of the spirit, but merely the result of a necromantic geas.

"However, this will allow the continued one-sided growth of The New Art, dealing generally with purely physical matters, while the old religious superstitions will remain accepted in psychical matters. I can't adequately describe to you the weirdity of such a mingling, or the absurdly unbelievable conflicts that will result."

Basdon said, "I think I can imagine a little of it. Having been a god-warrior, and now being . . . whatever I am, I know something of mental conflicts."

"So you do," nodded the magician.

"But you have told nothing of what you said needs to be done," the swordsman reminded him.

"I was getting to that. The age of The New Art will have to surmount its unbalanced development, or destroy itself. To win through the crisis, man will need nothing less than a favoring destiny."

"Favoring destiny?" Basdon asked, puzzled.

"That's good luck in layman's terms," explained the magician. "It was the last great development of The Art, before the decline began a century ago when universal necromancy began to shadow the earth and negate our work. A potent talisman of destinic adjustment still exists amid the ruins of Oliber-by-Midsea. It is powerless now, and defenseless."

"What power did it *ever* have?" Basdon asked sharply. "I would say the people of earth have seen little good luck during the past century!"

"In answer, I can only say that, bad though our condition is, it could have been worse by far," replied the magician. "The fate we were able to compromise ourselves out of, because of the strength of our favoring destiny, was . . . well, it's best left unhinted at. Even a spirit such as yours, swordsman, with the strength to struggle as you are doing against the geas of the necromancy, might fail if faced, unprepared, by such knowledge."

Basdon nodded acceptance of that, having little curiosity for horrible might-have-beens. "Then you hope to forward this favoring destiny to the next age of magic," he surmised.

"Yes, I wish to recover the talisman of Oliber-by-Midsea and conceal it where it will keep safely. Then, when the universal geas loses its potency, the talisman will begin functioning once more."

"May you fare well in this undertaking," said Basdon. "For myself, I care little for what happens twenty thousand years from now."

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This remark appeared to depress the magician. "It is doubtless true that the geas occludes from you all knowledge of the human spirit's infinite survival," he mumbled. "The concept that you will live many lifetimes in many bodies, both during and after the age of religion, has no real meaning for you. Thus, you are not too concerned about future conditions. I regret that. Your help would have been useful in my quest."

Basdon blinked. He should have guessed that all this talk was leading up to something. "You want me to go with you to Oliber?"

The magician nodded. "I will need two with me. First, a guide to the ruined city and to the proper place in it. And second, a man of arms who is familiar with the ways of the god-warriors, as the worshippers of Vishan are now sovereign in the Midsea region. She who will guide is not far away, waiting, as I have been, for the proper third member of our party."

Basdon considered in silence. Finally he spoke. "You said it matters not if bodies be buried or burned. Why is that?"

"Because in either case the universal geas seizes the spirit immediately upon the body's death. Unlike our own piddling blackspellers, those from beyond earth do not need unburnt remains from which to trace and capture the departed soul. They seize all spirits, degrade them into worshippers, and return them to earth to seek newconceived bodies for new lives as god-warriors and god-women. It saddens me to think the child near birthing by Jarno's wife will, as a near certainty, prove afflicted by the geas."

"Then there is little point in my pilgrimage along the legion's route, if that is true," said Basdon.

"It is true," Jonker assured him. "Although it is not a truth to be told to such good and simple men as Jarno. It is better to let them find comfort in freeing bodies from the earth—and freeing earth from bodies."

Basdon made his decision. "Very well, magician, we will seek Oliber-by-Midsea together. I have little concern for your purpose, but . . . but I have nothing better to do."

Jonker rose and extended his hand to touch Basdon's forehead, the swordsman returning the gesture to seal the pact.

"You will be welcome on those terms," said the magician, "and may the journey be more rewarding than you expect."

II.

IT WAS TEN DAYS later, after Jonker had settled a substitute keeper in his inn and had dealt with various other matters, when they set out.

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Jonker took the lead on his big spotted mare along a trail that led northeast over the fertile rolling countryside of Nenkunal. The packhorse, reined to the magician's saddle, followed, and Basdon rode in the rear.

"The highwitch Haslil," Jonker said over his shoulder, "lives some nine leagues away. She will know we are coming, as she sees minds at a distance, and will probably be ready to join the journey with no delay. Unless, that is, she has had difficulty finding suitable fosters for her small granddaughter."

"She is a woman of some age, then," said Basdon, who had hoped the sorceress who was to be their guide would be youthful, and as like as possible to Suni.

"Haslil is a crone," Jonker replied. "So much so that she's becoming frail. If protected from harm she will endure for the journey to the ruined city, but I don't think she will see Nenkunal afterward."

"Does The Art tell you as much?" asked the swordsman.

"The Art tells me almost nothing of matters in which I am immediately concerned. Only in the distance do events take on clarity. And that is to the good. No man should know of his own death, or, more important, whether an undertaking such as ours will succeed or fail."

"How much does our success depend upon the sorceress?" asked Basdon.

"Heavily. She attended the last Great Assembly, nigh fifty years ago, in Oliber, and knows the location of things. You and I alone would be hard pressed even to find the city, so complete has been the destruction thereabouts by the worshippers. And it would be dangerous indeed to ask directions of the locals."

Basdon nodded. "Oliber-by-Midsea is called a city of evil by the god-warriors. Evil is supposed to still linger about the ruins, and infect the countryside for miles around."

"The place has been cursed, all right," agreed Jonker, "but not by my kind of magic, as the worshippers believe."

The day's ride was pleasant, for men and horses alike. Nenkunal had been fortunate in that the inroads of the coming age had been slower here than in most regions Basdon had traversed. The abundant crops in the fields they rode past were ample evidence that the farmers of this land still had the Green Hand. And those tending fields near the trail waved and shouted merrily as the swordsman and magician rode by.

How different they were, Basdon mused, from worshipper farmers, who struggled to the point of exhaustion and surliness for meager and withered harvests. The new age

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was going to know much of hunger, he told himself glumly.

That night they were put up in the home of a merchant, in a village too small to boast an inn. The next day they rode on toward the cottage of the sorceress Haslil.

The land over which they passed was steepening, with field crops giving way to orchards and the distance between dwellings growing. By midafternoon the hills were small mountains, tangled with timber.

Jonker suddenly reined his mare to a halt and dismounted, waving Basdon to do the same.

"What is it?" asked the swordsman. "We're not there, are we?"

"Haslil's cottage is perhaps a hundred yards ahead, beyond that turn in the trail," said Jonker in a low, tense voice. "But there is trouble."

"God-warriors?" asked Basdon.

Jonker shook his head. "If they were here, they would be everywhere. No, I believe it's a necromancer."

A slight shift of the breeze caused Basdon to sniff the air. "I smell dog odor."

"Black-spellers often house enslaved spirits in dogs," said Jonker. "If we approach it must be on foot. Weredogs would panic the horses."

Basdon answered the implied question by tieing his mount's reins to a sapling. Jonker nodded and did likewise. "If we must fight the dogs, try to make your blows fatal. That is the greatest kindness that can be done to a spirit trapped in an animal body." The magician drew his rod from the saddle pack, gripped it and tested its point lightly against the palm of his hand. He sighed, "It lacks the power of old, but it should serve."

"Nothing has cast a shadow on this," replied Basdon, drawing his sword.

They moved forward silently, around the bend in the trail and into view of the sorceress' cottage. The breeze still favored them and they walked on. They were within twenty yards of the door when the dogs took note of them and poured baying from their shelter beneath a porch.

There were eight of the murderously miserable brutes, all of them boar-hunters as large as wolves and armed with vicious teeth.

The two men halted, backs together and weapons poised alertly for the onslaught.

The weredogs skidded to a halt just out of reach and formed a semicircle, leaving the trail behind the men open.

One of them whined, "Avaunt, sirs! You are trespassers here!"

"How is your master called?" demanded Jonker.

"He is called Master," replied the dog. "Begone, or we will feed

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on your fat belly."

Jonker grunted in annoyance. "Your master is the trespasser here," he snapped. "Now move aside. Once he is properly dealt with, I'll do what I can to free you from your misery."

The dogs conferred among themselves in growls and whimpers in which few words could be distinguished.

"We do our Master's bidding," said the one that had spoken before. He bared his fangs. "Begone, and quickly!"

"We will deal with your master," Jonker replied stubbornly.

With that the pack attacked.

Basdon skewered one that came leaping at his throat, and took a tearing bite in the thigh before he could free his blade and slash through the neck of the brute clinging there. The severed head clung to his leg for several moments before falling to the ground. Having learned the folly of thrusting from that beginning, Basdon kept his blade free, guarding himself with quick slashes. A canine howl of terminal dismay behind him let him know the magician's rod was producing dire results.

Then he was too busy to give a thought to Jonker as the remaining dogs concentrated their assault on him.

His blade flashed and sliced repeatedly, blood coursing down its length to spray away from the point on every swing. He was aware of having one squirming monster trapped, his boot firmly on its neck, for what seemed to be an age while waiting for a spare instant in which to dispatch it. The neck gave a convulsive heave and the squirming ended, and Basdon guessed the magician had eliminated that nuisance for him.

The battle was over as suddenly as it started. Every weredog was either dead or mortally wounded, and Jonker moved among the latter giving them the coup de grace while Basdon, now aware of the pain in his thigh, sat on the red-speckled grass and pressed his hand against the wound.

Jonker took note, made an adjustment in his rod, and hurried to the swordsman's side. "Move your hand," he ordered. "I'll cauterize the wound until it can be properly cured. We must hurry!"

Basdon slowly eased his blood-covered hand away, and yelped with anguish as the rod made searing contact. He blinked the tears out of his eyes and saw the torn flesh was no longer bleeding.

He came to his feet, ignoring the pain, and followed Jonker toward the house. The magician hit the front door with rod and boot at the same time, and the door slammed open. He waddled through. Basdon darted in to stand at his side, dripping sword ready for further action.

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"Ah, so it's you, Laestarp," Jonker was saying conversationally. "Even in the old days your ethics were dubious. So it has come to this."

He was facing, across the room, a string-bearded magician in a filthy robe, a man who impressed Basdon at first as being abnormally tall, but after an instant he realized the man was merely abnormally thin.

This apparition-like black-speller grinned maliciously. "Ah, Norjek the Fat," he sneered, calling Jonker by what Basdon guessed was his companion's real name. "More ungainly than ever, I see. And in low company if my Art does not mistake me, which it seldom does. A renegade god-warrior, no less."

"Where is Haslil?" Jonker rapped, with no jollity at all.

Laestarp made a grimace of mock regret. "It is sad, but the old girl's soul is now in the care of magicians greater than ourselves," he said piously. "Presumably she knew you were coming, and that gave her the will to be stubborn to the end. She would not bend to my superior power, and as it happens in such unfortunate cases, she broke at last, while you were tormenting my poor servants outside."

The black-speller moved a few cautious steps, keeping his eyes on Jonker, and drew a curtain from in front of a bed nook. The withered, half-naked body of a crone lay there.

"As you can see," Laestarp added, "her spirit has taken its leave, despite my efforts to restrain it here."

"You are a fool, Laestarp," said Jonker. "An overeducated fool."

Laestarp shrugged. "One does as best one can with his abilities, in a world that grows less perfect with each day. But as you can see, good colleague, whatever errand brought you here has come to naught. You need not linger. I will tend to the crone's proper burning, along with that of my cruelly dispatched servants. Let us hope not to meet again, Norjek, as we both seem destined to lose tragically when we encounter."

Jonker's shoulders drooped and he glanced at Basdon. "The harm is done past mending," he muttered. "We may as well return home."

Basdon was cold with anger, and his aching leg did nothing to improve his mood. Before him stood the stereotype of the vile Ungodly Magician, the villain he had been taught to hate as a youthful worshipper, but the like of which he had not previously met in Nenkunal.

"And leave this scum infesting the earth?" he gritted.

"His power to do harm is minimal, now that his dogs are gone," shrugged Jonker, "and the universal geas is now too strong for him to enslave other spirits. Let him live."

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Basdon frowned in frustration, but he realized that Jonker had more understanding than he.

"Very well. But you mentioned a small granddaughter of the sorceress . . ."

"Oh, yes," nodded Jonker, "I'd forgotten the child. We must see her into proper fosterage. Where is the child, Laestarp?"

The black-speller had paled. "Perhaps in the kitchen," he said with a show of unconcern. "Don't trouble yourselves with her, good men. I will see her into kindly keeping when the burnings are done."

Jonker studied him for a long moment. Then he sighed. "You are too filled with sly intrigues to read well, Laestarp. But some things are obvious, and others I can guess. Among the former is that you have not the air of a man whose hopes have been confounded. Whatever your purpose here was, you still hope to accomplish it. And the purpose I can guess at. We will have the grandchild, or we will have you dead!"

"Oh, come-come, good colleague!" Laestarp half-whined. "Enough ill has been done this day! Don't irk me by refusing my kindly inclination to let you depart in peace."

"We will have the grandchild," Jonker repeated firmly.

Laestarp looked from one grim face to the other, then smiled. "You are not an easy man to deceive, Norjek. The child is dead, too, but through no deed of mine. It was one of the strange new pestilences that struck her down. I hesitated to tell you this, fearing that in your present mood you would blame her death on me."

"The child is not dead," said Jonker.

"But . . . but . . ."

Jonker gestured to Basdon. "You were right, swordsman. Slay him while I counter his Art."

Basdon moved forward.

"Good men!" screeched Laestarp. "I will gladly share with you the trove by the Midsea! There is plenty there for each of us, and—"

Basdon's sword cut his plea short, and the black-speller's body, nearly decapitated by the stroke, fell lifeless to the floor.

"Now you will suffer as you've inflicted, necromancer!" Jonker said in a loud voice.

"He didn't hear you," said Basdon, wiping his blade on a drapery.

"He heard," Jonker replied. "I must find the child." He waddled swiftly across the room and through a door. Basdon started to follow, then decided his help was not sufficiently needed to keep him on his injured leg. He went to the bed nook, tossed the crone's body off onto the floor, and laid down in her place.

His last thought was that he

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wouldn't have dreamed of treating a dead body with such seeming disrespect while he had remained a worshipper. But a body, after the spirit had departed, was merely so much meat . . .

He fell asleep . . . and had nightmares about dead bodies that were far more than so much meat.

THE SMELL OF FOOD woke him. He sat up and saw it was night. The room was lit by a couple of candles, and Jonker was putting plates on a table.

Basdon moved to the edge of the bed. He saw his leg had been bandaged, and there was no pain in it. Jonker grinned at him.

"Let's eat, swordsman. Then we have some work to do." The magician nodded toward the two bodies on the floor.

Basdon stood up and walked to the table, noticing only a mild sensation of weakness in his leg. "Did you find the child?" he asked.

Jonker nodded. "She's sleeping now. It's best that she remain so until we clean up the gore a bit."

"Then Laestarp did not harm her?"

Jonker frowned as he filled his plate. "Frankly, Basdon, I'm not sure what he did to her. She was in a geas-daze when I found her in one of the back rooms. I brought her out of it, and questioned her, but she could tell me little. All indications are that she's been grossly geased, but I don't know to what purpose. Nor can I break the geas."

"I thought that one magician's geas could be broken by another," the swordsman remarked, puzzled.

"In the old days that was true," replied Jonker, shaking his head, "but now . . . well, when a geas is superimposed on a spirit already afflicted by universal necromancy, the two entrapments frequently interweave, and the stronger lends its strength to the weaker. That seems to be what's happened to the child Eanna."

"You mean she's a worshipper?"

"So her words and concerns indicate," Jonker said sadly.

"Poor kid," said Basdon.

"But despite her affliction, she can guide us to Oliber-by-Midsea, in her grandmother's stead."

"But how could a mere child . . .?"

"Her grandmother trained her for it. Maybe the old girl suspected that something would keep her from going, or maybe it was her way of entertaining the child. Haslil, as I believe I told you, was able to see minds at a distance. Also, under correct conditions she could show her mind to another. She spent many hours showing little Eanna how she traveled to Oliber as a young woman, and some of the things she saw in that city. The child knows the way as well as if she'd been there."

The magician sighed and pushed

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his plate away. "It is too bad, I suppose, that Laestarp didn't know this about Eanna far sooner. Then perhaps he would merely have stolen the child instead of torturing the old woman to death in an effort to make her cooperate."

"What was Laestarp after, anyway?" Basdon asked.

"Power," shrugged Jonker. "Some of the talismans lost in Oliber should still have fair potency in trained hands. I suppose Laestarp would have succeeded in setting himself up somewhere as a . . . a . . . what is that word for a speaker among worshippers?"

"You mean a priest?"

"That's the word. Laestarp probably saw himself as a sort of super-priest, demi-magician, taking control of some backward region, and perhaps going on from there. Many such will arise during the coming centuries, as talismans are accidentally unearthed here and there and put to clumsy use. Most such discoveries will be destroyed, however. The worshipers and god-warriors seem intent on leaving no trace of the Age of Magic in existence, either on or under the earth."

"I know," said Basdon. "I did my share of smashing as a god-warrior."

"Don't let your past deeds prey on your spirit," the magician admonished. "A man who has fought, within himself, the power of the universal geas and won a partial victory deserves praise rather than blame."

"A *partial* victory, indeed," said Basdon, recalling the nightmares that had troubled his nap in the bed nook.

III.

THE JOURNEY RESUMED the following morning, this time with Basdon in front leading a somewhat aged mare which had belonged to the sorceress Haslil and now ridden by her granddaughter Eanna. Jonker followed with the packhorse tied to his saddle.

It was well, Basdon mused, that there was a separate mount for the child. Though she was no more than six years old, she was exceedingly fat. Jonker murmured something to Basdon about "compulsive eating" as a symptom of the girl's affliction, and it was easy to see she was afflicted by the worshipper curse.

She had become slightly hysterical when Basdon made to lift her onto her mount. *"Don't touch me!"* she had squalled. This reminded the swordsman strongly of Belissa who also, more often than not, reacted badly to the touch of a man.

Then, to add to the absurdity of it all, she allowed Jonker to lift her aboard with no fuss. Evidently his

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ministrations to her the day before, Basdon guessed, had taken the magician out of the category of "man" and placed him in the safer image of, perhaps, "uncle" or "doctor".

The straw-yellow color of the child's hair also called Belissa to Basdon's mind, and so did her generally sullen demeanor. As the first morning on the road progressed, the swordsman detested the child more and more.

But Eanna was an accurate guide, as Jonker affirmed during the midday rest.

"I know the first twenty leagues or so of the route," he told Basdon privately, "and the tyke hasn't missed a single turning."

The first night was spent in an inn, still well inside the borders of Nenkunal. They stopped there long before dark, so as not to tire the child unduly with too much unaccustomed riding. The little girl ate a supper fit to fill a burly wood-cutter and puffed off to bed.

Basdon's dislike gave away briefly to awed wonder the next morning when she put away a breakfast that would have left him too full to move. No wonder she was so fat. The oddity was that, despite the way she was eating, she appeared no fatter than the day before . . . possibly a shade less so.

That morning she was less grumpy on the road, and seemed to take a childish delight in being able to command the movements of two adults. During the afternoon some trivial remark of Basdon's (he never learned exactly what) irked her, and the sullenness of the day before returned in full force. For an hour she grew increasingly fretful as she directed them along a dwindling trail that wound laboriously along the side of the highest mountain they had yet encountered.

Basdon glanced back at her finally and saw her eyes were large with alarm. He guessed she was frightened by the gloominess of the mountainside, where tall trees kept the trail in perpetual twilight.

Annoyed with himself for disliking a helpless child, he said gently, "We will come to an opening soon, won't we? We can rest there for the night."

"I d-don't know," she replied in a tremulous whine.

"Oh? Where did your grandmother stop for the night?"

"I don't know that, either. I mean . . . I do know, but it wasn't along here."

He sensed pure terror in her voice and reined his horse to a halt.

"What's wrong, child?" he asked.

"*I'm lost!*" she wailed, and began weeping loudly.

"Lost?" Basdon looked at Jonker who had drawn up behind the girl's mare and was watching her in expressionless silence.

"Y-you made me m-mad," the child sobbed, "so I went the wrong

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w-way to fix you!"

The swordsman stifled a groan of anger. "All right, I'm sorry I made you mad," he snapped. "Now stop crying and we'll get back on the right road."

"I-I don't know *how!*" she bellowed. "I been trying for a long time, but I d-don't know the w-way! This black old p-path keeps going wrong!"

Basdon started to reply but was stopped by a gesture from the magician. For minutes then they sat silently on their horses while the little girl continued to bawl.

Then Jonker said, "I believe I can find the way back, Eanna. Just leave it to me. In two hours of riding we'll be back on a trail your grandmother showed you."

She stared at him in hopeful disbelief. Obviously it had not occured to her that these men could find their way anywhere without her guidance. "You can?"

"Certainly. But we can't ride another two hours today. I noticed a spot a few hundred yards back where we can stay the night in fair comfort, however."

He turned his big mare about and moved off. The swordsman and child followed.

After Eanna had proven that her emotional upset had not harmed her appetite and had crawled into her tent, Basdon asked the magician, "Did you know what she was up to all the time?"

"Yes," Jonker replied, poking idly at the embers of the campfire. "I didn't interfere, because it was best to let her learn her lesson here in Nenkunal, where one can stray in fair safety and where I'm familiar with the lay of the land. Such a spiteful little prank could be costly later on, in worshipper country. I think she will try nothing like that again."

After a moment Basdon said, "The fault is mine in part. The blubbery brat irks me, and I have perhaps made less effort than I should to conceal my dislike, and treat her kindly. I will try harder hereafter."

"That would be helpful, swordsman. We must keep in mind that the child has no one but us to depend upon for protection and care, and we are yet practically strangers to her. She needs assurance that she can trust and depend upon us. When she feels disliked, as she did today, she is likely to do some foolish thing to prove that we need her as much as she needs us. I imagine when she led us astray, she had a vision of you on your knees before her, humbly begging her to guide you out of the wilderness, and promising her anything she wanted." The magician chuckled and added, "Such dreams of blackmail have to be thwarted, of course, when they occur. But better yet, a child should not be obliged to have such

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dreams."

Basdon nodded but said nothing. He felt ashamed of himself.

AS JONKER HAD PROMISED, he led them back to the proper route with no difficulty the next morning. Eanna seemed relieved to be once more on a road she knew.

And Basdon noted she seemed far less babyish than before. The misadventure of the previous afternoon, he decided, had definitely matured her.

She even looked more mature, like a child of eight years rather than one of six. Perhaps that was due to the fact that, despite her fantastic appetite, she was losing fat under the unaccustomed exercise and strain of travel.

That afternoon they crossed the unmarked border of Nenkunal in the unpeopled Hif Hills. They were now in a region that had been untraveled for years, and the trails were thick with weeds and waste-brush, often to the point of being obscured and almost impassable. Eanna's eyes often flicked about with alarm for a space of hundreds of yards in search of a familiar marking. Then she would spot something that had survived the years since Haslil passed . . . a distinctive rock outcrop, or boulder, or twisty little ravine . . . and giggle with relief. At such times Basdon, heeding Jonker's words, would turn in his saddle to give the child an approving smile.

In the night's camp beside a tiny unusual good spirits as well as her usual tremendous appetite. usual tremendous appetite.

Basdon's eyes studied her back as she arose from her place by the fire and walked slowly to her tent. Her rump was still a protruding balloon of blubber, but it no longer threatened to split her dress with every waddling step. In fact, her clothing now hung somewhat loosely on her. The child was definitely losing weight.

Which was nothing to worry about. She had it to spare.

The next morning as he helped the magician prepare breakfast, he saw the girl come back from the stream tugging at her dress, then peering down at the results with a puzzled expression.

The hem of the dress reached only to her knees. Basdon frowned. The last time he had noticed, that same grubby dress had concealed the child's gross legs well below the knee.

"Jonker!" he hissed. "The kid's gotten taller!"

"Yes," said the magician. "All that food and fat had to be going into something. I realized what was happening yesterday."

"But this is unheard of!" the swordsman objected.

"Among worshippers, perhaps it is," replied Jonker. "Not among magicians. It is a cruel geas to in-

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flict upon a child, which is perhaps why it is so effective now when the universal necromancy stifles most benignant applications of The Art. No doubt it is the work of Laestarp."

"Just what's happening to her? Is she going to become a giantess?"

"No, she's merely growing up and maturing faster, at a rate of approximately one year per day. It is a two-week journey to Oliber-by-Midsea. Eanna will be a young woman of twenty when we reach there."

Basdon stared in shock at the girl, who was kneeling in front of her tent with head and arms inside digging through her belongings, probably in search of a longer dress. Her big rump hiked her skirt high in the back, revealing an ugly expanse of lumpy, pasty-white thighs.

"But why should even a creature like Laestarp want to do that?" he demanded.

"I can think of two reasons," said Jonker. "One, he wanted a woman, force-grown under his control, for his sexual enjoyment and abuse. Two, he meant to blackmail old Haslil by offering to break the geas on the child in return for the grandmother's cooperation. I doubt if he had the power to break it, but Haslil might have yielded if she had lived and we hadn't arrived."

"I wish I had killed him more slowly," Basdon gritted. After a moment he added, "Should she be told what's happening?"

Jonker sighed. "She needs some kind of explanation, but not the truth. I'll handle it tonight, after giving it more thought."

The explanation must have been a good one, although Basdon did not learn exactly what it was the magician told the child. In any event, Eanna took her continued rapid advance toward adulthood with evident pleasure as the days passed. Remembering what Jonker had said about her feelings of insecurity, Basdon guessed she was pleased to think she would so quickly be a grown-up, able to fend for herself if need be.

But she was bothered by the manner in which her clothing covered less and less of her, especially after a joking remark by the swordsman. She did most of her growing at night, so that every day her dresses rode higher on her legs.

"We can count the days of our journey," Basdon quipped, "by the darkening rings of tan around your thighs."

She reddened and glared at him while tugging futilly at the hem of the dress. "That was an ugly thing to say!" she lashed at him.

He grimaced. "My apologies, child," he muttered. How like Bellisa her reaction had been!

THEY CAME DOWN from the Hif Hills into countryside in which

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Basdon felt uncomfortably at home. This was worshipper territory, and Jonker stared at the stunted crops in the fields.

"This is a starving land," he remarked in dismay.

"Not starving," said Basdon. "By slaving from dawn till dusk, these people produce enough to keep themselves fed most of the time."

"But they will have none to spare us, and our food is nearly gone."

"We have gold," Basdon shrugged. "They'll gladly sell us anything they have, to the point of keeping no food for themselves."

"They are so fond of gold?"

"Yes. We must be cautious in dealing with them, to not let them suspect the amount of gold we carry. They would see it as a fortune worth killing strangers to obtain."

The magician nodded his understanding.

The ragged workers the travelers passed at intervals gazed at them, sometimes covertly, with cold curiosity. None responded when Jonker shouted greetings, so after a couple of attempts he kept silent. But he studied them with his sharp magician's eye.

"I can make little of them," he sighed at last. "The geas is too strong upon them, obscuring their spirits. What they think of us I cannot say."

Basdon chuckled. "They take us for townsmen, which means to them that we are evil tricksters who will rob them by subterfuge if they give us the chance."

"You don't think, then, that they suspect we're not worshippers?"

"No, they don't suspect. On the other hand, they won't think we're *good* worshippers like themselves, since we're not ragged farmers."

The girl Eanna complained, "This place isn't pretty like it used to be."

"You'll see little prettiness the rest of the trip," Basdon told her.

When the narrow road they were following passed close to a hovel that looked affluent in comparison to most, they stopped and the men dismounted.

"Hello!" Basdon yelled at the silent house.

After a moment he saw a shadow of movement through a tiny glassless window. Whoever was inside was looking the travelers over with greedy fear, he suspected, and the best thing to do was wait patiently.

Finally a harsh female voice responded, "Be on your way, townsmen! I have nothing with which to buy whatever you sell! So go, and get that creature taken in sin from my sight!"

Basdon glanced at Eanna whose blank expression showed that she did not know the caustic words referred to her. He suppressed a grin. The way the girl was growing

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out of her baby dresses did leave her indecently exposed by local standards.

"We are selling nothing, good woman," he replied. "Rather, we are buying for good gold. Our provender runs low. We need cured meat, sweetroot, ground grain, and wine."

"Starve or eat magic!" she yelled back.

"As you can see from the figures of my companions," he answered good-humoredly, "we have no desire to starve. Nor can we eat magic, although I have dealt with magicians in my time." As he said the last, he slapped his sword to make his meaning clear. Then he fingered a square coin out of his belt pouch and flipped it in the air and caught it. "This piece of gold has known the inside of a magician's pocket," he said.

"Better you spend it for cloth to cover your slut's nakedness, and her hardly more than a child!" the woman sniffed.

"One cannot make a cat eat onions, good woman," Basdon replied. He flipped the coin up again, and watched it glitter in the sunlight.

"Humpf! Well, stay where you are, and I'll see what I can find."

"Many thanks, good woman."

He heard the dim sounds of the woman moving away from the window and rummaging around in the back of the house. He turned and winked at Jonker, then smiled up at Eanna, who was still on her mare and looking grumpy. He guessed she had caught some meaning from the peasant woman's insults. Surely she had heard the term "slut" before.

He felt a wave of anger at the woman for her self-righteous condemnation of a girl who was obviously an innocent child. What could have prompted such . . . ?

He paused in midthought and looked at Eanna again.

It dawned on him that she *did* look like a slut. An eleven-year-old one, to be sure, but what was left of her baby-fat—and there was more than a plenty of it—gave her a precociously sexed look that was affirmed by her sullen pout and the dirtiness of her straw-colored hair.

"No, Basdon," murmured Jonker softly.

The swordsman started, and looked at the magician. For a moment he was half-puzzled, then he realized that the magician had read his lust before it had fully reached his own consciousness. "Oh, well, of course not," he whispered back. "After all, she's still a child."

"A child with a bigger responsibility thrust upon her than many adults will ever face." said Jonker. "Let's add nothing to the unavoidable problems she has ahead of her."

Basdon nodded.

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Shortly the peasant woman returned to the window, this time leaning into the light enough for her pinched, hard face to be seen. After ten minutes of stiff bargaining, Basdon obtained the needed supplies and paid her the gold coin.

When the travelers were on their way once more, Jonker remarked, "We could have paid her more amply."

"And aroused her suspicions," grunted the swordsman. "Trading among worshippers is not the easy-going matter it is in Nenkunal. Here, the traders cheat for the smallest grain of advantage."

Jonker sighed. "Well, if it must be done that way, so be it. In which case I congratulate you for besting the woman quite thoroughly."

"So I did, but she doesn't think so. Gold is highly valued here, although that coin I paid her will probably find its way into the nearest temple of Vishan without doing her or her family any material benefit."

THEY STOPPED for the night early, partly because the girl was whining for supper but more because they were nearing a town through which the trail of Haslil would lead them. Basdon had doubts about attempting to pass through a sizable habitation with the magician and the girl, and wanted to ride ahead to scout the situation.

"In any instance," he explained to Jonker, "there will be a small god-warrior garrison there, along with the usual priests and inquisitors. The three of us, with our horses, would be sure to arouse curiosity passing through. Alone, however, I would merely be another warrior going through on leave. What I intend to do is pass completely through the town, following the road Eanna has described to me. Then I'll explore a way back that circles the town, and which we can take in safety tomorrow morning."

Jonker frowned. "I suppose the risk is necessary," he agreed grudgingly. "The girl and I will keep safely enough here, well off the road and concealed as our camp is. But if by chance you should be taken by the garrison we would all be in sore straits. And worse, so would our mission."

"I'll take care," Basdon assured him. He remounted and returned to the road.

As he made his way toward the town he paused wherever his view was unobstructed to left or right to study the landscape, in search of trails that might be useful in bypassing the populated area. Farms were scattered in fair number, and paths were not hard to find. The only problem he anticipated would be in bringing the magician and girl out, on the far side of town, at a point Eanna would recognize. She was complaining frequently about

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changes in the appearance of things since her grandmother had journeyed this way.

And her own changing appearance was posing problems, too, he thought wrily. So far, no harm had been done. In fact, the disreputable look of the girl in her underclothed condition might usefully keep the locals, who would otherwise be nosey, at a distance.

But when those baby dresses crept up another six inches . . . well, the scandal would rock the whole region. Something would have to be done, and soon, about Eanna's apparel.

He reached the town, and found it little different from dozens of others he had known. The people went about their business in dedicated apathy, faithful to their carnate god Vishan and obedient to the rule of the god-warrior garrison. The few god-warriors Basdon saw and saluted as he rode along looked softened by garrison life. None bothered to challenge him.

He stopped at a pub for a cup of wine, and inquired of the keeper the whereabouts of a seamstress shop. He moved on to the shop, purchased a dress for his "lady-love" as he explained it, then rode on beyond the town.

Once in open-farmland again, he turned off to the left and began circling back to camp, turning frequently in his saddle to memorize the aspects of the path as it would appear on the morrow. Night was darkening when he reached the road he had taken into town.

Jonker greeted him with relief. "I had no premonition of trouble," he said, "but in this land I'm not sure the senses of The Art can be trusted."

"There were no problems," the swordsman replied, passing the bundled dress to the girl. "Also, I brought a present for Eanna."

She unfolded it and held it up. It was, by intention, too long for her.

"You will fit that size in a couple of days," Basdon said.

The girl was beaming. She hugged the garment to her chest and murmured, "It's pretty."

"Didn't you risk rousing suspicion, buying a dress?" Jonker asked uneasily.

"No. God-warriors do buy such things. I merely told the woman in the shop it was for my lady-love, and no questions were asked."

"But I'm *not* your lady-love!" flared Eanna in a tone of horror.

Basdon, irked by her sudden ingratitude, was about to tell her how thoroughly right she was when Jonker silenced him with a demanding gesture.

"Whether you are his lady-love or not," the magician said gently to the girl, "that was what he needed to say to the shop woman to satisfy her curiosity."

"Well, I'm not," she replied,

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somewhat mollified. Basdon watched her flounce away to her tent with annoyed puzzlement.

"What was that about?" he asked, going to the fire and picking up a chunk of roast mutton.

"You were about to deny loving her," said the magician. "That would have wounded her deeply."

"I don't see why," the swordsman growled. "She had just denied loving me."

The magician said slowly, "As an afflicted eleven-year-old, she can't accept herself as a 'lady-love' right now. But if you had denied her, she would remember your words very clearly three or four days hence, when her own feelings might be completely different."

Basdon grunted. "I doubt that. She's the type who'll think her body's too pure to be touched by a lover."

"Maybe so. You know the results of the universal geas with more experience than I. For example, I don't know why it is usual for god-warriors to buy garments for their women. Wouldn't the women prefer to receive gold with which to buy clothing that pleases them?"

"They might prefer that, but it isn't done. Only women who are very degraded, and use sex for their livelihood, accept coins. Respectable girls give themselves in return for presents, if they give themselves at all."

Jonker gazed thoughtfully at the fire while Basdon munched his supper. At last the magician sighed, "The earth has entered a peculiar new age, indeed."

IV.

In the days that followed they made steady progress along the route of Haslil through regions now inhabited by worshippers. While they made no effort to conceal themselves—a sure way to rouse suspicions—neither did they make themselves too evident. All towns were first scouted by Basdon, then by-passed. The nights were spent in the open, even on those few occasions when a wayside inn was available.

Meanwhile, Eanna lengthened, slimmed, and blossomed into a beauty beyond Basdon's wildest desires. The memory of the unattainable Belissa bothered him no more, because beside him rode a girl whose dewy freshness more than equalled the total of Belissa's charms.

The trouble was that Eanna also more than equalled Belissa in unattainability.

The swordsman rode on in mingled dejection and grim determination, seldom looking at the young woman who was all too inclined to draw back as if his slightest glance were a brutal assault on her chastity.

Jonker sympathized with his

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plight, but was of no help. The afflictions of the geas were beyond the powers of his magic. He could only urge Basdon to conduct himself in a manner that would not upset the girl and endanger the mission. And he could only suggest that, while passing through some town, the swordsman might take time for dalliance with some willing female.

Earlier in the journey Basdon might have taken the suggestion, but now he was too obsessed with Eanna to wish for any substitute.

"I will take time for nothing," he replied angrily. "We should reach Oliber tomorrow. Then I will see the two of you safely back to the Hif Hills. Thus, in a matter of thirteen days from now, I will escape the girl's presence and thrust her from my mind."

Jonker shook his head sadly. "You fail to reckon on the days we may spend searching the ruins of Oliber for the talismans. But bear with us, Basdon. Long before you part company with the maiden, your lust will have turned to pity, or perhaps to disgust."

"The pity I feel now, because I can see that she is as unhappy in her affliction as I. But disgust . . ." Basdon shook his head. "Never. Would that it were true."

"It will be, as Laestarp's geas continues its depraved work on the poor child," said Jonker.

Basdon started. "You mean it does not stop? That she will age before our eyes?"

"Not exactly. The geas hastens maturity, which is not the same in all facets as aging. Thus Eanna still has the freshness of a child of six in a body matured to nineteen years. But maturity in time involves processes closely related to aging, and these can kill as readily as aging itself. Also, these processes in an unaged body set up conflicts not ordinarily seen. In most cases, the geas Laestarp imposed on Eanna is fatal in six weeks."

"Just another month, then!" gasped the swordsman in a horrified whisper.

"Yes. Time enough to finish our task and return home, so that her ashes can be scattered by the still-kindly breezes of Nenkunal," murmured Jonker.

"You have not told her this?"

"No, and I will not until the disparate forces at work within her make the prospect of an early death a welcome relief."

EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING they by-passed the last inhabited town, with Basdon taking unusual precautions to make it seem he was skirting the evil region of Oliber rather than entering it.

Soon he was leading the magician and girl through a wilderness even more desolate than the Hif Hills. What trees still stood were blackened as if by countless

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burnings, and the brush was gnarled and stunted.

"How much farther?" he asked Eanna without looking at her.

"I don't know, except that it's close," she said. "Nothing is like it was."

As they advanced such vegetation as there was gradually vanished, as if the soil itself had been poisoned. Rainstorms had taken their toll of the denuded ground. Gullies too steep for climbing frequently blocked their way and had to be skirted.

At last the girl admitted, "I haven't seen anything I knew for a long time. I'm going by the sun. That's all I can do."

"Don't worry," said the magician. "Just do your best, and we'll find it."

They urged their mounts up a rise and onto a rocky plateau where the hardness of the ground had protected it somewhat from erosion.

Before them lay the remains of Oliber-by-Midsea, some thousand yards away. Beyond it, half hidden by a greenish haze, was a murky salt marsh where blue water had once gleamed, as if the sea itself had drawn back, in pious repulsion, from what was now deemed a center of ancient evil.

But the startling sight was not the city or the marsh, but the god-warrior pickets stationed along the outskirts of the ruins. Basdon muttered a curse and loosened his sword in its sheath.

"This I did not anticipate," hissed Jonker, alarmed.

"Who are they?" asked Eanna.

"God-warriors," said Basdon. "They've seen us, I believe. Yes, some of them are mounting."

"Shall we make a run for safety?" asked the magician.

Basdon frowned in thought. "Perhaps Eanna could escape on my horse, but our other mounts are too slow."

"Where would I go? Who would . . . who would . . . ?" protested the girl.

"Never mind," grunted Basdon. "We won't try that, and we won't run. We'll go ahead and see what happens." He jogged his horse into a sedate walk toward a gathering of ten warriors who now barred the way.

"Running would be useless, I suppose," sighed Jonker.

"What will they do to us?" hissed the terrified girl.

"Who knows?" Basdon replied. "Nothing until after they take us. Magician, have your rod ready, but out of sight!"

Basdon was not particularly dismayed by the prospect of battle against totally overwhelming odds. As a fighting man, he had long been reconciled to the likelihood of an early and violent end. And what better time than now, when death would bring the end to bitterness,

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frustration, and burning eyes?

Nor, he realized, did he have reason to regret the sharing of his fate with Jonker and Eanna. The old magician was an anachronism, a regret-burdened leftover of a happier age, striving absurdly for a reflowering of The Art in a ridiculously distant future. As for the girl, a quick death would cost her nothing but a single month of increasing pain and misery.

Thus he rode into the presence of the enemy with a feeling of calm and confidence such as he had not known for years. This, it occurred to him, was what he had been seeking for a long time.

"Hold!" bellowed the officer of the warriors. "What business have you here, swordsman?"

"The business of the god," Basdon replied brashly, his hand on his sword hilt.

"Ah?" The officer looked past him to give Jonker a fleeting glance and Eanna a lingering stare, under which the girl flinched. The officer grinned. "And who are these?" he demanded.

"Who do they appear to be?" Basdon snapped back.

The officer grimaced with quick anger, then seemed to think better of it. "Very well, you may pass. You will not need a guide, I trust." He gave the ruins behind him a fearful glance as he said the latter.

"We can find our way," Basdon replied almost automatically. In an astonished daze, he jogged his horse forward as the warriors drew apart to make way for him and his companions.

When they had ridden into the edge of the ruins, well out of the hearing of the warrior guards, Jonker murmured in amazed admiration, "Beautifully done, swordsman! I thought you were baiting the officer into the immediate slaughter of us all, but instead . . . here we are! But I confess that I'm totally mystified!"

"So am I," grumbled Basdon, still in a condition of shock at being alive. "I expected no better than you."

Jonker stared at him. "There must be some explanation."

Crossly, Basdon replied, "I don't even know why warriors would be here, much less why they would let us pass."

"I know where we are!" exclaimed Eanna, the fearful encounter with the guards pushed from her mind by the sight of familiar landmarks. "The gold thing we want to get is in that building, deep down!" She was pointing to a hulking structure most of which still stood among the crumbled wreckage of the city.

They directed their mounts to it, and when they were in its shadow Basdon saw why it had not been pulled down with the others. It was constructed of stones too massive to move without extreme difficulty

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and much labor, and too tough to pound down with ordinary rams.

But when Basdon got off his horse and led the way inside, he saw that it was a hollow shell from the ground up.

"We must uncover a stairway or tunnel leading downward," said Jonker, looking around at the thick rubble as if he had no idea where to begin.

A darker than average pile of stone caught Basdon's eye. He picked his way through the litter to its side, where he bent and picked up a rock.

"Damp," he said to the others who had followed him. "Someone else has tried to uncover something here, very recently." He dropped the rock, drew his sword, and crept around the pile until he reached the edge of a gaping black hole. "Stairs," he said softly to Jonker.

The magician peered into the darkness. "Who could be down there?"

"I know of one way to find out," said the swordsman. He took a step down into the darkness, ducked his head away from the overhanging ledge of loose rock, and continued down the stairs. He could hear the magician and the girl following close behind him.

For a brief moment he mused on the fact that he was acting with the foolhardiness of a man angered because death had passed him by. A man the sting had missed on the first try, now eager to give death another chance.

The darkness underground was not complete, even though the stairs doubled back as they descended three flights. At the bottom Basdon saw why.

"Light down this hallway," he muttered over his shoulder.

"Yes, but neither firelight nor daylight," Jonker whispered.

A muffled, regular thudding sound suddenly started up in the direction of the light.

"I . . . I think that noise is close to where the thing is," Eanna said shakily.

"Then that's where we're going," said Basdon. He strode down the hallway, which was longer than he had judged from the apparent dimness of the light. The thudding was almost thunder loud and the light nearly blinding in the darkness when he reached the door from which the illumination poured and stepped through.

The glistening figure with the heavy sledge whirled away from the wall which he was beating down and glared ominously at the swordsman.

"Sacrilege!" he stormed. "No man enters the god's presence unbidden! Prepare to die, warrior, and for your spirit to burn lingeringly in . . ."

The tremendous voice fell silent for an instant as Jonker and Eanna came into the light behind Basdon.

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The swordsman stepped aside for them, never taking his eyes from the unbelievable figure before him.

The sledge-wielder was man in form, but to a man as a horse is to a pony. The difference was not so much in size as in moulding and strength. Heavy muscles on thick-boned arms and legs seemed almost to glow with power, and the mighty chest gave the feeling that it could suck the room empty of air in one quick breath. The shape of the breechclout, the sledge-wielder's only garment, evidenced a maleness as vast as the musculature.

Now he displayed his formidable white teeth in a broad smile as his eyes gleamed at Eanna.

"So!" he rumbled. "The travelers from Nenkunal have arrived, unwittingly bringing me a well-prepared tidbit!"

Basdon glanced at the staring magician and girl. "He's the god Vishan," he muttered.

"The renegade god-warrior still recognizes his god," remarked Vishan in high amusement, leaning on the handle of his sledge. "It is well, criminal, that you thoughtfully dispatched the spirit of one Laestarp to the keeping of We Who Own All. And well too that those of Us who received him mistook him briefly for one of Ourselves. Their examination of him revealed that evil still remained in my realm, buried in these ruins . . . and also that evil lurked in the craven soul of a lard-bellied magician and a bloodshot-eyed deserter."

"Why, he's one of the Great Necromancers!" muttered Jonker in dismay.

"I am one of We Who Own All," Vishan reproved sternly.

"You don't own me," the magician retorted with a show of courage Basdon had not expected.

"Ah, but I will very soon. You and the deserter. Already I own the tidbit." Vishan laughed. "Look at her!"

The swordsman glanced at Eanna and found her gazing raptly at the face of the god. Her expression stunned him, and his eyes felt like twin flames.

"Come stand before me, tidbit," the god commanded.

The girl moved forward like a sleepwalker. Basdon lurched to grab her and pull her back, but was detained by the sudden firm grip of the magician on his wrist.

Rapidly Jonker hissed in his ear: "I *do* lust for vengeance, swordsman! Will you help me get it?"

Basdon swallowed hard and nodded, only half attentive to the magician's words as he watched Eanna approach the carnate god.

"Then we will attack him as we did Laestarp," whispered Jonker.

Again Basdon nodded, gripped his sword tightly and moved forward.

Vishan's eyes moved from the

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girl to the swordsman, and glittered with impatience. "You would interrupt my pleasure, trivial mosquito, for as long as it takes to swat you? Very well! *Die!*"

Basdon stumbled momentarily as a blast of energy swirled at him and around him. He was not harmed. He lurched forward once more.

Jonker bellowed furiously, "You are embodied, necromancer, which limits your magic to such as I can counter!"

"Presumptious upstarts!" roared Vishan, now thoroughly enraged. "Very well, renegade, my muscles and hammer against your stringy tendons and childish blade! Come to the first of a thousand miserable deaths I mean to watch you suffer!"

Eanna said in a voice ringing with passion: "I am yours, my god and master!"

Vishan looked aside at her as he raised his sledge against the swordsman. "Yes. I'll enjoy you at my leisure," he said, returning his attention to his enemy.

"Your joy will be my delight," Eanna almost sang, "the pain you inflict my glory, my degradation and destruction by you my pride and uplift, the ruination of my body the salvation of my spirit, the . . ."

She had unfastened her dress and now let it drop to the floor. Basdon gasped, and Vishan himself seemed surprised when she suddenly pressed her bare body against his side.

In a blind rage Basdon lunged. The agile Vishan moved his sledge up quickly and the swordsman's thrust was deflected with a sharp clang of metal on metal. As the god brought his weapon down, he shoved the butt of the handle hard into the pit of Eanna's stomach. She stumbled back to fall to the floor, choking for breath, while the god snapped at her, "Stay out of the way!"

But even as Vishan was knocking the girl aside, Basdon was lunging again, this time to bring blood. His sword pierced the god's right forearm, and passed between the two bones. Vishan's roar of pain was deafening. He raised the sledge, jerking Basdon, clinging grimly to his stuck sword, completely off his feet. The pain that movement created brought another howl from the god as the blade suddenly slipped free and was flung, along with the swordsman, into the rubble six feet away.

Basdon, stunned and badly bruised, leaped staggeringly to his feet, trying to set himself for the god's assault.

But Vishan was not attacking. He was gazing in tortured wonder at his bleeding arm.

"It's only a wound," Basdon snarled hoarsely. "Come get another."

From across the room Jonker chortled, "How does it feel, necro-

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mancer, not to be allowed out of a body in pain? The strength of my art has shrunken, but the power of my rod is still sufficient to keep you trapped in your body! You cannot shift an inch away from its pain, and direct it from outside! So *suffer*, spawn of darkness, *suffer!*"

Vishan's eyes darted frantically between swordsman and magician for an instant, then he made a dash for the latter. Basdon ran after him and slashed at the mighty left arm, which was just launching the sledge in a one-handed swing at the magician. The weapon slipped from the god's numbed fingers to slam clatteringly against the wall twenty feet away.

Vishan was disarmed.

He backed away, making strange guttural sobs, as Basdon advanced on him. The swordsman's lips were drawn tight in the vicious grin of a killer at work.

"*Not quick!*" Jonker shouted demandingly. "Slay him slowly, swordsman! Much may depend on it!"

Basdon did not know or care what depended on the slowness of Vishan's death, but he liked the idea. He was a small cat with a sharp claw, torturing playfully a giant, fearful mouse. First one leg, then watch and listen while the mouse screeches and tries to hop away. Then slash the metal claw into the other leg. The mouse screams and falls. It looks up at the small cat with glazed eyes, and lays still. Rake the claw shallowly across its belly! Ah! That makes it an active toy again!

"*That's enough, Basdon!*" Jonker was shouting in his ear. "*That's enough!*"

Slowly the little cat faded and Basdon blinked his scorching eyes and let tension flow from alert nerves. "All right," he mumbled thickly.

He looked around the room and saw Eanna painfully pushing herself up to a sitting position, where Vishan had knocked her. She did not give him a glance as her attention focused on the dieing body of the god.

Jonker was saying: "Total physical death won't come for perhaps ten minutes yet, but his spirit would already be gone if I would allow it. Did you know, swordsman, that a soul hardly ever stays with a body to the point of death? It almost always departs seconds or even minutes ahead of that, to escape the trauma." He chuckled. "When Vishan tries to rejoin his colleagues beyond earth, this should leave him such a gibbering idiot of a spirit that he won't be able to explain what happened to him! Why, they might not even recognize him, and think he's merely another poor, battered human soul!"

"*No!*" screamed Eanna.

She was on her feet suddenly,

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launching herself at the magician. *"Evil murderers!"* she lashed as she tried to tear Jonker's rod from his hands. *"Let him go! Release my god!"*

Jonker twisted, trying to put his body between the rod and the violent girl. *"Eanna!* Stop it!" he yelped. "Pull her away, swordsman!"

Basdon quickly sheathed his sword and grasped the girl's wrists, tightening his grip until she let go of the rod. Then he drew her away, kicking and screaming, from the magician.

"Keep her away from me until this is finished," said Jonker.

Basdon pulled her across the room where, after futile efforts to kick and bite him, Eanna stopped struggling and lapsed into soft sobbing. Fearful that he was hurting her, the swordsman eased his grip on her wrists.

Immediately she was a flurry of motion. She jerked free and ran toward the door to the hallway. *"Good warriors!"* she screamed. *"Come quick!"*

"Catch her!" bellowed Jonker.

Basdon dashed after her and caught up with her a short distance down the dark hall. This time he clamped an arm around her waist and held her tightly. She yelled as she squirmed frantically against him.

"Be quiet!" he warned. Her fists were pounding against his bruised chest, and he pulled her close to leave her no room in which to strike.

Then, with her bare body pressed against him, he became indifferent to her weak blows and to her screams.

He carried her down to the floor. Her screams changed in quality but continued as he took her in savage haste.

When it was over, he lay on his back and lifted her limp form onto his, to get her off the rough, cold floor. She lay there in comatose apathy, too exhausted to cry.

Basdon, too, was exhausted, and bitter with self-disgust, and with pity for the girl.

Only now, for the first time since he had been the appalled observer to Eanna's reaction to the god Vishan, did the thought occur that her actions were not of her own choosing, but had merely followed the dictates of the universal geas. She could not help but consider herself the property of the gods, of the We Who Own All—property to be kept inviolate from the touch of mere human masculinity.

He hated to think what a lost broken creature his violation had made her. And he wished he had the heart to rise up, seize his sword, and drive it through her heart, thus sparing her a month that his deed of lust could only make a thousandfold more grievous for her. But he could not.

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He was indifferently aware of Jonker coming into the hallway, looking at them for a moment, then returning to the lighted room. Later he heard the thud of stones being moved about, accompanied by the magician's effortful gruntings. But he did not move until the touch of Eanna's body began to stir his desire once more. Then he rose, lifting the girl in his arms, and returned to the room.

The light that had formerly filled it now gleamed through the hole Vishan had been pounding in the wall. Basdon guessed the magician, after enlarging the hole, had taken the light through to search for the buried talismans of The Art.

After a glance at the inert form of Vishan, Basdon carried the girl to the spot where she had dropped her dress. He picked it up and clumsily slipped her into it, then sat cradling her in his arms. Her stained face was peaceful in semiconsciousness; it was a face to remind him forcefully that, in many important respects of mind, this beautiful, demolished woman was in actuality still a child of six years.

He was still sitting there brooding half an hour later when Jonker struggled through the hole in the wall, carrying Vishan's light in one hand and what appeared to be a small, double-handled gold vase in the other.

"Well, I found it," puffed the magician with satisfaction as he brushed himself off. "Now, swordsman, if you can bluff us past the guards with the ease you did before, we will be on our hurried way home."

"What about . . . Eanna?" asked Basdon.

"Um, yes. Well, if she remains as she is now, you could say the god had his way with her, that she will await his future pleasure elsewhere when she recovers." The magician moved closer to touch the girl's forehead and feel her wrist. "However, I fear she will not remain as she is. She's growing alert now, and will certainly betray us to the guards if she has the chance." He shook his head regretfully. "We must leave her here, Basdon."

"I cannot," the swordsman said. "You go, and I will stay."

"Be sensible!" exploded Jonker. "There is nothing she wants from you, nothing you can do for her! Leave her to the morbid pleasure of mourning herself to death over the body of her slain god! It is urgent to the completion of our highly important quest that you come with me, to help protect the talisman on the return to Nenkunal! You must not let us fail now, swordsman, for no good cause!"

"I have no stomach left for good causes, including your own," snapped Basdon. "I'll stay—and mourn for her while she mourns for that hunk of carrion."

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Jonker sighed. "You fought the geas within yourself with valor and determination, swordsman," he said sorrowfully. "But fighting at length wears away strength. Yours is now gone, and the geas controls you as surely as it controls that poor child in your arms."

Basdon realized this was true. He said nothing.

With another sigh Jonker turned away. He walked to where a large block of stone provided a makeshift table, and placed the light on it along with some other odds and ends which he drew from beneath his robe. Basdon watched with dull interest as the magician began working with the stuff.

"You are obliging me to use something very precious—and very consumable—that I found while seeking the talisman a moment ago. I had no idea such an item still existed. Certainly it is the last, and was preserved only by the proximity of the talisman. I would have kept it for an occasion of great need, but . . ." the magician shrugged his shoulders, ". . . perhaps no greater need than that of this moment will arise. For once, I wish I could envision the near future, the years of my own life . . ."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Basdon, half in worry and half in annoyance, rubbing hard at his eyes which were paining mercilessly.

"This," said Jonker, pulling a small ball of translucent green from his robe and placing it carefully on the rock. "And this!" He tapped a protuberance on the support of the light, which flicked out immediately.

But there was no darkness. Whiteness was everywhere. Not whiteness to see by. In fact, Basdon's surroundings were totally invisible to him. There was just whiteness . . . in front of his eyes, above his eyes, below them . . . in *back* of them . . . everywhere whiteness . . . that kept getting whiter.

The location of the whiteness, he realized, was in his mind. And there, in the midst of all that brilliance, pictures began to race fleetingly past. He recognized none as being events from his life, but he sensed they were all experiences his spirit had known somewhere in the vastness of time:

He was confronting a huge spear-bearing gladiator who (for some unseen reason) it was absolutely vital that he slay. But before he could set himself with sword and shield the enemy had plunged the spear through him. He was dying, but could not let himself die. Defeat was unthinkable. Thus, in his agony, his identity suddenly twisted and shifted to become the spearman and victor.

Ah! he thought in the instant between the vanishing of that scene

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and the appearance of the next. So *that* is why I foolishly thrust with my sword, as if it were a spear, when I should slash! In his fight with Laestarp's weredogs and again in the battle with Vishan, that habit had nearly gotten him killed. He realized it would not happen again.

The scenes flashed by, too numerous to count, often too hurried to be clearly defined. Then:

Whiter than white, the glowing form of a woman . . . Eanna? . . . Belissa? . . . She was both and neither, a composite of all feminine beauty. But she was not his; rather, he was hers! Her property. Her worshipper, along with dimly sensed legions of others. He lusted for but could not touch her perfection, and his lust was her excuse. The arm of the goddess reached down, and two fingertips, hotter than all the suns, touched and seared his eyes. He fled into blind, pain-filled darkness.

The bitch! he cursed. But . . . but . . . He grunted with the realization. She hadn't been a woman at all! She was a hypnotic construct, a product of outrageously advanced and depraved magic, used to enslave through false beauty!

Shortly thereafter the whiteness faded to grey, then went black. Basdon was aware of the girl stirring in his arms, and of fumbling sounds from Jonker. Then Vishan's light came on.

The swordsman looked down at the girl's face, and saw her eyes were open and looking at him. He smiled at her, wondering why, if she were conscious, she was not pulling away from him.

"Your eyes are blue and white," she said wonderingly. "They used to be red."

He had not noticed before. The burning was gone. That did not seem of any importance. "Your eyes are also blue and white, and beautiful," he replied.

"Do you know you hurt me, out in the hall?" she asked.

"Yes, I know. I'm very sorry. I won't do that to you again, I promise."

"You will, too," she contradicted him. "Or you better. I'll get mad at you if you don't."

She pulled herself up to him and kissed him on the mouth, then giggled.

In delighted wonder, Basdon threw Jonker a questioning look.

"All geases are broken for both of you," said the magician, looking regretfully at a small pile of greenish ash on his makeshift table. "I wonder how many thousands of years will pass before that can be said of any other human beings."

V.

BASDON AND EANNA would have dallied endlessly along the return route to Nenkunal, but for the

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pressing anxiety of the magician.

"We may run out of time at any instant," Jonker warned and pleaded. "I fear that They Who Own All have learned by now that Vishan met with disaster in Oliber-by-Midsea. And doubtless they are trying to learn or guess the cause of it. So far we have survived, but only because Vishan's soul was too inturbulated to tell of us. Surely they will guess soon, and raise the countryside against us. Let us hurry!"

So they pushed their mounts hard, through the days and long into the moonlit nights. But the farms and villages of the worshippers remained calm, the people obviously unaware that they no longer had a living god. The Hif Hills loomed in the grey distance ahead of them.

"I'm puzzled by some things, magician," said the swordsman as they jogged along one morning. "Most of all by the geas-breaker you used on Eanna and myself in Oliber."

"That was a device for the production of spiritual energy in its purest form," explained Jonker. "It supercharges any spirit within range of its radiance, and enables the spirit to shatter all the geases that bind it, even those imposed on it a thousand lifetimes ago."

"Very well. My question is this: With that kind of a defense on earth, how did it happen that the necromancers from between the stars enslaved us?"

Jonker lowered his face. After a while he said, "Our world has known no perfect age, swordsman. The age of magic was our most glorious, but it had its failings. As you know, we had our own black-spellers. And even honest magicians were selfish, as all men are. Thus, we restricted very tightly the fabrication and use of the white-energy generators, so that our own geas-making would not be compromised. When the universal necromancers made their assault, we were . . . we were too late in mending our ways."

Basdon nodded. "My other puzzle is this: The souls of each of the three of us will be taken upon our deaths by They Who Own All, will they not?"

"Yes," said the magician.

"Then how will we hide that talisman you are carrying in your saddlepack?" Basdon demanded. "Can they not probe the truth out of our spirits, and discover the hiding place?"

Jonker grinned. "Not if we do not know the place ourselves. Are you familiar with the River Heralple?"

"I've heard of it, while in Nenkunal, but I have not seen it."

"It flows down swiftly from the Fogfather Mountains to the Eastern Ocean. But before emptying, the main stream divides into thousands of rivulets that move

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sluggishly through a vast swampy deltaland. There the River Heralple's burden of mud and silt is dropped. I propose that there, too, will the talisman of favoring destiny be dropped. I've thought long on this matter, swordsman. If the talisman is thrown into the swift portion of the river above the delta, no man nor magician will be able to guess which of those thousands of rivulets will receive it, nor where along their windings it will come to rest and be covered, as the centuries pass, by layers of the earth of Nenkunal. It will be safe from everyone's knowing, including our own."

Basdon could see no flaw in the plan. "Then all we need do is reach that river," he remarked. "For that reason, I hope the storm over the Hif Hills gentles before we reach them."

"Storm?" asked Jonker, peering suddenly ahead. "Yes . . . yes . . . I see. My eyes are less sharp than they once were."

Eanna said, "I see it. Big black clouds, and lightning shooting out."

"It is most unseasonal," Jonker commented with a worried frown.

The clouds, hanging low over the hills ahead, roiled and twisted with a velocity Basdon had never before observed in any storm. And their coloring was a peculiar yellow-grey, rather than white, where sunlight struck their upper edges. Below, they were an impenetrable purple-black.

The farmers the riders passed along the way were viewing the distant turmoil with dumb alarm. If the storm moved down on them, now in early harvest season, its havoc could leave them to starve in the months ahead.

However, the clouds seemed to be holding their position over the hills, neither advancing nor retreating.

THAT NIGHT the travelers camped short of the hills, with gusts of wind flapping their tents and making a fire impossible to maintain. The darkness was filled with noise, loud even at a distance, of the roaring wind and clashing thunder. Several times they felt the earth quiver beneath them.

With the dawn the fury abated somewhat. The horses were mounted and the journey resumed. Soon the Hif Hills were reached, and the riders stared about in shocked dismay.

It was plain to see that the storm had brought no rain. The clouds had been dust and dirt, a pall of which still lingered in the fitful morning gusts. And the hills, desolate before, were now a tumbled ruin. Trees were splintered or uprooted. Hardly a shrub had its roots in soil. In places the wind had scrubbed away everything, down to bedrock. In other places, logs and brush were piled in high, dusty drifts. Here and there, smoke rose

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from a lightning-set fire.

"That was no natural storm," murmured Jonker.

"I can see that," replied Basdon.

Nothing more was said as they made their halting way over the broken land. Going was slow and difficult, and kept them too busy watching their horses' steps to brood over the question which, Basdon guessed, had occurred even to Eanna:

If the hills bordering Nenkunal had been tormented thus, *what had happened to Nenkunal itself?*

They learned the answer when they reached the highest crest.

Here the air was clear of dust and they could see ahead for tens of leagues across the valleys of Nenkunal . . . across, but not down into, because all was dust below.

The storm the travelers had seen over the Hif Hills, they now realized fully, was only the blunted edge of destruction. All the wide land of Nenkunal had been shaken, lashed, and scoured by awesome forces. Indeed, the fury was now only partly abated. Cubic leagues of earth were still windborne over what had been green and happy landscapes.

"Sand," muttered Jonker. "I knew it to be Nenkunal's destiny to lie its full length under waterless dunes, but I never dreamt it would come so soon, so suddenly."

"I suppose we know why," said Basdon.

"Yes . . . They Who Own All have struck."

"But why didn't they strike us instead?" asked Eanna her eyes wide with horror.

"Because, being what they are, they assumed wrongly," said the magician. "They guessed that we, like Laestarp, wanted to use the talismans of Oliber that would give us power to dominate—talismans that I found and destroyed as objects of more potential harm than good in the new age. With those talismans we could have traveled more swiftly, and would have been here in time to be included in this ruin. And to make doubly sure that earth-magic would never rise against them, they destroyed the entire country which would be the base of operations for such magic."

"Then we're to blame," whispered Eanna.

"Child, everyone and no one is to blame," Jonker retorted crossly.

"The question is, what do we do now?" asked Basdon.

"Forge ahead, as best we can," the magician said, with meager hope in his tone. "Try to reach the River Heralple."

Basdon nodded and started his horse moving down toward the swirling dust storms. It was futile to assume, he knew, that the Heralple still flowed, but it would serve as a meaningful destination.

"And where from there?" he asked over his shoulder.

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"Probably south," hazarded the magician, "into the tropical wilderness. That, I suppose, is where other survivors of Nenkunal will try to go."

LATE THE FOLLOWING DAY they passed the site of Haslil's cottage. No trace of the house remained, and Eanna permitted herself to find relief in tears as they pushed on toward the lowlands.

"I did not know there was so much sand in the world," muttered Basdon when they reached the first valley.

"Perhaps there wasn't until now," replied Jonker.

All next day they journeyed southeastward over the dry gritty earth, often having to dismount when the horses floundered in a loosely packed drift. There was little breeze, or the going would have been more difficult by far.

When they stopped, they shared their supply of sweetroot with the horses, since forage was nonexistent. Fortunately, Jonker's water-purification charm had survived the universal geas, and they could make use of the muddy, rapidly stagnating pools they occasionally discovered.

The next day was different in that the heat was becoming stifling. They stopped frequently to rest and cool their mounts, and were glad when night brought a swift chill to the air.

They were awakened by a rising wind at dawn.

"Shall we try to travel through this?" yelled Basdon, holding his arm in front of his face to shelter his eyes and nose from the painfully cutting grit in the air.

"Our supplies are not plentiful enough for us to wait out the blow," replied Jonker. "We have to move on."

So they walked, leading the horses, throughout the day, cloths over their noses and mouths, and eyes open only enough to glimpse what lay ahead. All day the dust swirled so densely that visibility was limited to a few yards.

"I hope you know which way we're going!" the swordsman yelled once.

"I do, within a reasonable margin of error," answered the magician.

Basdon did not want to take more dust into his mouth by asking what a "reasonable margin of error" amounted to.

As the growing darkness of the sandstorm finally spoke the coming of night, they found themselves, rather to their surprise, in the sheltering bend of a low cliff thrown up by one of the earth tremors.

"We had better stop here," said Basdon. "Eanna and the horses can go little further."

"Very well. Get the girl settled in what comfort you can find for her while I unload the mounts," said Jonker.

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Basdon led Eanna into the narrowest niche in the bend of the cliff, seated her, and helped her remove the cloth which had been protecting her face. Her bare feet and legs looked near to bleeding from the abrasion of the sand, and he hoped Jonker had some quick healing for them.

"You shouldn't treat me like I'm a baby," she protested. "Go help Jonker. I'm a grown-up woman."

He smiled at her. "So I know." He kissed her and turned to go just as Jonker came waddling up with a look of consternation on his face.

"Basdon! My saddle is gone!" he exclaimed.

"Oh?" Basdon frowned thoughtfully. None of them had ridden that day, but the saddles had been on the horses. "I suppose all this blowing sand worked between the straps and gradually wore them through," he surmised. "Well, you can use my saddle when we can mount again. I can ride bareback."

"But that's not the point!" sputtered the magician. "The *talisman* . . . it was in the saddlepack!"

Basdon sat down, feeling tired at the very thought of trying to cover the day's backtrail in search of the saddle and its contents. "We'll never find it," he muttered. "We'll never even find our own trail, more than ten yards back from this spot!"

"I admit it appears hopeless," replied Jonker, sounding stubborn, "but we've got to try. Although the way this sand is blowing, the saddle could well be concealed by now. And we'll have to wait until morning, but then we'll search very carefully . . ."

"It's hopeless!" Basdon bellowed angrily. "We could spend *days* hunting that thing without finding it! And look at my poor darling's legs! Do what you wish, magician, but I'm getting her out of this deadly land as soon as possible!"

Jonker looked from one to the other, and his heavy old shoulders slumped. "It is hard to accept defeat, after coming so close to success," he muttered sadly. "But you are right, swordsman. I fear the talisman is hopelessly lost."

"But isn't that what you wanted it to be?" asked Eanna.

Jonker blinked and stared at her. "By my long-suffering spirit!" he exclaimed, *"so it is!* The talisman of favoring destiny now lies beneath the earth of Nenkunal! And I, who lost it, haven't the foggiest notion within twenty leagues of where it lies!"

"The sand will keep piling up?" asked Basdon.

"Yes! It's safe!"

"And good riddance!" said Basdon. He moved to Eanna's side and hugged her closely. "In the morning, then, we can turn toward the south, to see what hope and comfort the wilderness has to of-

(cont. on page 75)

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ALIEN

A parable: a vignette: a unique offering from David Bunch!

DAVID R. BUNCH

HE COULD HAVE jingled down the streets like a million bells, the little man who was nowhere around. His silver and golden clothes of light could have made a tinkle-tankle tune; even under a dark-cloud sky they would have made a sweet noise. His face would have been a round pumpkin-yellow as he smiled like a jolly cat. And yet he was nowhere around. Everyone said *no!* The chains came down and held him in dungeons under the streets, under the sewers, under the darkest places in everyone's mind. And yet at times there was almost a tinkle-tankle sound. At times he almost smiled, and his face was there, almost, a jolly-pumpkin yellow, innocent as a mouse in its nest.

And once there was a time when the great heaving skies became cloudier, and everyone ran for his widest, sturdiest black-umbrella. But little man-not-around stood tall in the rain with only his pumpkin-yellow face to save him. "I am your umbrella," he said. But the squeamish multitudes paid no slightest heed to little man-not-around. They wanted rain-proof roofs and crush-proof steel over them; they wanted *real* protection. No siree, they were not getting wet.

But the sun came out after that, and the umbrellas folded with wet sllussh-noise. "I wanted—I — wanted—I wanted" softly softly softly said little man-not-around, "to be—to be—to be your umbrella."

"Get lost—scat, scat!" said a big burly hairy-chested hurrying-moving-man with not a bit of anyone's love on his mind. "Get out of *my* way, get, get!" said a little weazened master-money-man, — miser-tycoon type, probing after another few million dollars for his musty, mildewed, malajusted bank account. "Go to hell, oh go go go to hell," said little missy-nylon-high-heels-powderface-lipstick-rouge, — "I've got my very own shopping to do."

"It's only a small thing, such a very small thing to do. And it'll make everyone feel ever so much nicer and cleaner," said pumpkin-jolly-face as he squeezed his heart until there were no more tears. "Oh, oh," he said, "such a small

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thing for everyone to do."

But the chorus came back with the final, bitter, vindictive, no-use-to-argue-with-us scat, get out, go to hell.

So the clear and cloudy days wore on, and the little-man-not-around was still nowhere there. "Oh ho, I'll get them sometime when night puts out her jolly, golden, moonlit lamps," he said. "They'll all come back then from where they've all been, scared, sad, hurried, horrid and bad with each other, and I'll get them. Just like round and cheerful-pumpkin-yellow faces of love they'll seem." He clapped his hands in a little bit of glee. "I'll have them for my very own self, for *love*!" So he thought.

That night came down, and those lamps came out. But those lamps lit up chill as moons over frozen fields of snow. "I'll get them. Oh, I'll get them—somehow," said jolly-pumpkin-face-man-not-around, almost silly with winner's confidence in the face of almost assured non-victory. Then, "Not so good," he said.

Under the white glare the racers came down in spasms of straining urgency and speed. They balled up at the red lights, and they lanced like darts through the green. And all about them the summer air seemed to frown like a disappointed child. "Keep smiling. Oh do keep smiling," pleaded little man-not-around to the spirits in the leaves. "We're smiling," replied the leaves. —"*We're dying*!" replied the leaves. And they coughed and turned black from the gas and smoke in the breeze as the air frowned, as the outraged air grimaced.

So the night wore on in all its hurry-up, and the wagons rolled through the dust, the gas-pushed wagons of speed. A murked summer moon looked down, wan and sad. It was chilled and neglected by all the people in their cool air-conditioned thinking. "It's no use," said little jolly-pumpkin-face-man-not-around. "It's no use for me to be like I am. Here."

Then he changed his silver and golden clothes of love for the steel of a railroad train. He clanked like a huge truck racing cargo down the line, on schedule, on time. He shrieked like a high jet plane. He was around then. He was right in line then with the thinking of very nearly almost completely everyone. Almost everyone saw him. Almost everyone admired him. Almost everyone said, "Ah-ha, *he's* strong, isn't he!? I'll bet he can go some!" —that's what they said. "I'll bet he can touch almost a thousand miles to the hour."

"You just *all* go to hell," he said in the logical normal way. "Because I've decided I've got my very own going to do." Then he pulled in his stomach, and he took a great gulp of the skull-and-crossbones

(cont. on page 75)

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. . . AND ANOTHER WORLD ABOVE

TED WHITE

LONG HAND—PRIMUS: *Herewith the first of a new series of stories about a new kind of sword and sorcery hero . . .*

Illustrated by MICHAEL NALLY

THE WIND caught and curled the edges of the night. The boy who was still called Long Hand wrapped his arms around himself in the unnatural chill, pausing in his climb up the steep path.

Ahead of him were the three men who had come among his people only a fortnight ago. Their forms had been swallowed by the gloom of the starless night and now even the sounds of their climb were lost amid the rising wail of the wind. It was possible that they had already reached the top of the high mesa; it was equally possible that they had divined in some way his pursuit and were now lurking in wait for him.

The wind gusted suddenly and filled the air with swirling dust. He slitted his eyes and cupped one hand over his nose and mouth. Lightning whitened the air and his scalp tingled as his long loose hair tried to rise and stand out from his head. Then thunder crashed deafeningly around him. He stumbled and fell, clutching at loose gravel and sliding a short way back down the narrow path.

The wind was howling now, the blackness of the night thick with airborn dust and grit and punctuated with blinding flashes of light and sound. He resumed his climb, fear clutching at his bowels, crawling upward on hands and knees, hugging the twisting trail. He opened his eyes only briefly against the dust and lightning, relying upon his other senses to keep him on the path.

THEY HAD COME among his people as mysteriously as they had departed. Three tall men, their skins as white as death, robed in black and striding afoot, their only apparent possessions long staffs which they used as walking sticks. The hour had been not long after dawn, and the nomadic camp was still in its first stir of morning life. Fires were going, food lending its scent to the brisk air, the dogs everywhere underfoot. Long Hand had been

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down at the spring, performing his morning ablutions, tickling his inner throat with a sprig of grass and vomitting his stomach clean of the accumulated night poisons even as he relieved his bladder and bowels, then stopping to the spring to drink the first draught of pure, clean water.

The dogs had not barked. That was the strangest thing—the first omen. When he had climbed back up the hill to the campsite the three strangers stood in a quiet group in the center of the circle formed by the huts of stretched hides—and the dogs were not barking. Indeed, the dogs—by nature, thought Long Hand, the most quarrelsome and most curious of all known beasts—the dogs were paying no attention at all to the three dark-clad strangers who stood in their midst.

Long Hand was but a boy—curious as boys are curious, fearful of the discipline of his elders, canny after the ways of his people—and as yet unnamed. The name he held was the name his mother had given him soon after his birth when the Old Grandmother looked at him and sniffed and said "He has long hands. He will be clumsy." His mother had replied, with the gentle dignity which had always characterised her, "A long hand reaches far. I will call him Long Hand." And thus Long Hand he had come to be and would yet remain, until he found his True Name and became a man.

His people numbered but one score and two, and Long Hand was

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one of four boys and seven girls. There had been other births after his, but life in this arid country of mesas and plains was hard and many infants did not survive. One learned to be fleet of foot and quick of hand—Long Hand was both—and the children were as adept at hunting and foraging as their elders.

Thus, that fateful morning, Long Hand discovered the three strange men and was fascinated by them.

They were kindly men who dispensed both healing salves and deep wisdom to their hosts. For the Old Grandmother, who was now very old and toothless, so that her food had first to be chewed by one of her daughters and then given to her to swallow, the wise men made a paste of an inconspicuous desert cactus. When she had eaten the paste, the old crone spoke of wonders all about them, of colors and miracles and spirits everywhere, and Long Hand knew that the wise men had somehow passed on to her some of their own magical wisdom. Then there was Bent Knee, a boy older than Long Hand, whose birth had killed his mother and whose leg had been twisted since that moment as a sign of what he had done. "Is it right for a baby to become a boy who becomes a man with this cruel deformity?" asked one of the wise men. And so saying, he passed his hands over Bent Knee's leg, straightening it. The boy turned pale and then passed out, but when he awoke that same day, his leg was no longer twisted and he could walk and run like any youth his age.

Long Hand said little, but hovered close and watched. He heard the three strange men whisper among themselves, with a sound like dry leaves rustling, not a word intelligible. And he watched their sure hands as they performed tasks both common and arcane, their fingers like white twigs, but so supple as to seem magical.

And thus, on a moonlit night all too soon after their arrival, he was awake to see the three wise men rise from their places near the dying fire, gather up their staffs, and steal away into the night.

He followed. He used all his craft to keep his pursuit unknown to those he followed, for he knew their senses to be abnormally keen. The way was unmarked; there was no path or trail. They seemed to be following a course known only to themselves, one which did not at first appear to follow the way of the land, but yet did not make directly across-country for a specific point. Instead, they followed a dry wash for some distance, then climbed its wall where it had eroded to a slope, and then continued in a direction roughly perpendicular to the meandering wash-gully. For a time thereafter their course seemed determined by the stars and Long Hand followed painfully over low ridges and across ravines in their wake. He guessed they had not yet gone beyond the boundaries of his own explorations, but the way in the moonlight was subtly alien and he paused from time to time to look

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backward and mark their way in his mind by landmarks—for he knew that a land can look very different when travelled in the opposite direction.

The night grew short before they came to the towering mesa that was to be their destination. The moon was low in the west when Long Hand became aware of the mesa—a flat-topped plug of land which rose like a low mountain out of the surrounding desert—and saw that instead of skirting it the three wise men were beginning to climb its side.

He waited for a long time while the three black-clad figures made their way painstakingly up the almost sheer cliffside; there was no cover to be had at the mesa's base and there would be none until those he followed had gained almost the top. He waited, curled up upon himself, in a pocket among boulders, and took the moment to rest. A breeze sprang up and lightly caressed his sweat-glistening skin and he wondered, almost peevishly, why he had done this thing. What did he hope for, in following these men here? He had sacrificed a night of sleep and he knew that the new day's chores would not wait for him to catch up with them. He was in for a scolding at best . . . .

The wind rose and scudding clouds began to close in across the sky, darkening the stars and obscuring all but silvery traces of the westering moon.

The light, he realized with a start, was almost gone. He could no longer see or hear the passage of the wise men up the mesa's side, and now—fear clenched momentarily within him—he was not certain he could find their way.

He rose and ran quickly across the desert floor, gaining the mesa's wall breathlessly and fighting off panic. He searched for long, breath-halting moments, and then found the path. It was little more than an animal track, no wider in spots than his own bare feet. It hugged the cliff-side and climbed and twisted precariously upward into the blackness of the pre-dawn night.

A STORM WAS BUILDING. The wind gusted fiercely, blasting him with sand and dust, while bright stabs of lightning rended the night and thunder pounded his ears. He crawled up the trail on his belly, hugging the mesa's wall as if afraid he might be blown away if he did otherwise. He followed the path with his fingertips, blundering now and again but always regaining it in time. The climb seemed endless, timeless, eternal. He felt himself trapped in a single never-failing moment, ever-battered by the still-dry storm.

And then there was the moment when his fingers groped and felt nothing, and his mind whirled until he realized that he had at last gained the mesa's top.

He halted then, still at the brim, and tried to see by the lightning flashes what lay before him.

It took several flashes before he

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was able to understand that the mesa top—unlike most—was not flat, but was dished in, sinking at its center in a gentle depression, the sides sloping upward to a rim. It was difficult to judge the extent of the mesa top, but it was not small, for the three dots down in the center of the basin were—he suddenly realized—the three men whom he had followed this night.

He strained his eyes to make out their actions, for they seemed to be intent upon a purpose, working together to fashion a framework about them. At first he thought they were building a shelter against the rising storm, but this was apparently not their purpose at all, since they did not cover the frame but entered it and sat upon the ground within its confines.

The wind was at his back now, urging him to abandon his post at the rim and seek shelter below, but he did nothing more than crawl down into a slight depression just inside the rim, from which he could still watch the men he had followed so far.

The air around him became still, the wind for a moment in a lull, and he felt a *presence* around him. As he reached out to touch a nearby rock a spark of blue light flashed between the surface of the rock and his outstretched fingers, startling him and then stabbing him with fear. But as he peered into the gloom he saw other flashes of blue, sudden and then gone, magical wisps of tiny lightning, sparking from rock to rock and—

The frame-like structure the wise men had erected was glowing, pulsing with blue energy, like ribbons of fire, a tracery that surrounded and enclosed their barely-glimpsed figures.

The storm seemed to catch its breath and hold it and all the world was still, congealed in the night, yet alive with blue fire. The mesa-top glowed with sustained flashes of blue, sparks that seemed to attract each other, growing into glowing balls of light, wandering fitfully across the sunken landscape, rolling down into its center, racing like tumbling boulders toward the glowing frame and its three occupants.

Long Hand lay transfixed by the wonder and the marvel of it all, his breath contained within his lungs, too rapt to breathe. The moment seemed endless, yet unendurable, hovering upon the brink of—

The air turned brilliant, glaringly white, blinding him, incandescing all about him. And then black—with a thunderous concussion which battered him to the ground and left him momentarily lifeless, all breath expelled from his lungs, limp.

When he rose up again it was to the splatter of heavy drops of rain, each at large as his fist, scattered and striking the ground with explosions of dust. His ears rang and he pounded his head to no avail. A more distant flash of lightning struck, and he saw that the mesa top was now empty of all life save his own.

Dazed, half crawling and half

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walking, Long Hand made his way down into the center of the mesa's top.

The smell of strangeness hung heavily in the air here, and he all but tripped over the wise men's peculiar structure when he came upon it. It looked at first like the framing for a hut, awaiting only hides to be stretched over it. But the framing was not of wood, as he had originally thought. It was thinner, harder, cold to his touch and seemingly too insubstantial to support heavy animal hides. He wondered where the materials had come from, but did not ponder the point. Either they had carried these thin rods within their robes or they had found them here; either was equally to be puzzled at.

He wondered what to do now. The three men were gone—vanished off the mesa top as though they had never been there at all, only their arcane structure left to mark the fact that they had been there at all.

The winds were rising once more and the rain was beginning to pelt him, making welts upon his bare skin. Feeling lost and foolish, he crawled within the open frame and sat upon the ground where the wise men had sat, wondering as he did so why he was doing this.

The ground upon which he found himself sitting was hard, the baked, bricklike quality of ground where water has collected, then been evaporated by wind and sun. There were no hidden holes; no hollow-sounding places revealed themselves to his fist. Just hard, dry dirt, now beginning to dampen in the still-sporadic rain.

Where had they gone? He did not know, but he felt no doubt that they had somehow gone somewhere else. And his scalp began to crawl with his realization that *somewhere else* did not mean back down the trail from the mesa top.

He tried to the best of his ability to recall every moment which had transpired after he had gained the rim. Long Hand's powers of observation and recall were well trained; his survival as a man, he had been told many times, would depend upon these abilities. His eyes must be able to scan a flat and shimmering noontime landscape and note all movement and change, no matter how minute. And his memory must be able to tell him the nature of any change he might observe. The land was hard and cruel to those who did not know its ways. To know and understand the land was to survive upon it. And to survive was to observe and reckon.

He began, now, to try to order his memories: the dying of the wind, the gradual limning of nearby rocks with tiny blue flames, the increasing glow of the framework within which he now sat . . .

He opened his eyes as a flicker of color touched them and was astonished to see a pale memory of the blue fire upon the lattice-like frame that surrounded him. The rain had paused and now the wind seemed lessened as well. He felt the stirring of something within him,

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something hitherto unglimpsed, unknown—a spirit taking possession of him. He felt a terrible awe and something else—pride?

His fear calmed itself with the dying wind and he knew a moment of serenity unlike anything he had ever known throughout his childhood. He sensed a power within him. It was not he himself, he knew, but this place, a place of power, a place of great age where power might find focus. He was only a vessel through which the power might focus, even as had been the three before him.

But they—*they knew what to do.* He could only watch and wonder and watch yet more, passive to whatever might occur.

The blue light flickered everywhere within the rimmed mesa-top, and its glow was steadier now on the frame-like structure, but he could tell that the power was weaker this time, the moment less intense.

Then the bolt of lightning struck him.

THERE IS NO WAY to describe what happened then to Long Hand. His own consciousness seemed to explode with energy and then to expire. His body felt in that split moment as though it was shattering and flying apart in every direction. He knew a moment's clear thought: *I didn't do it right*—and in that same terrible moment he knew how these powers should have been harnessed, a knowledge that left him as swiftly as it came, leaving after it—

Nothing.

In the wake of that great blast of lightning came the storm, rain so fierce and forceful that it filled the basin of the mesa top, washing away and obliterating all signs of human passage. The fragile framework erected by the three wise men was torn apart and buried in the silt at the bottom of the basin. Of Long Hand there was no more trace than of those who had preceded him. He was gone from the face of the land as though he had never been.

And in the late dawn's light there was only a steaming lake, already rising into the dry air, soon to be gone as well.

II

LONG HAND AWOKE to find himself in another world. He knew this instantly, and accepted it as readily. He had died and his spirit had passed on to a new life as he had always known it would some day—but he felt saddened that he had died still a boy, still Unnamed, and thus unprepared for the Afterlife in which he now found himself.

That this was indeed the world of Afterlife he accepted without question, for he found himself lying face down amid thick grass, in the shade of a lushly-leafed tree, the trunk of which lay close to hand. Even while he lay silent, still gathering his stunned wits to him, a bird called out so close over his head that he felt he had only to rise

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to catch it. And, from somewhere beyond but also close, he heard the rushing sounds of water—a stream upon the bank of which he lay.

If this was not the paradise of easy hunting the legends spoke about, it would do as well. He rolled over, feeling as he did so sudden bruises all over his body, and stared upwards into the limbs of the tree overhead.

Green. Rich green everywhere. Sunlight dappled the green leaves of the tree and spilled here and there upon the green turf. The color was a balm to his eyes. He judged by the quality of the light that it was midday, yet he did not need to squint against the noonish glare. There was no glare here; the light was soft, golden, filtered with green.

Birds sang everywhere. Insects chirped and buzzed. He heard a scrambling sound and watched a small, curious, furry animal poke its head around the tree trunk from a limb above to regard him without fear.

He sat under the tree for a long time, letting his senses drink in and glory in the richness and profusion of life in this place. Even under his body, in the grass, life teemed. He yanked at a fistful of grass at his side—the kind of grass that grew only in the bottomlands at home, and then only during the season of rains—and pulled it up, roots thick with rich black earth. He laughed, then noticed that nestled in the thick sod were grubs, white and juicy. Without thinking, he plucked one loose and into his mouth. Its flavor was a burst of sweet water, better than any he had ever found in the desert. He shook more dirt free from the grass roots and picked a handful of grubs, popping each in turn into his mouth. A meal—a delicious meal—from a single handful of sod! Truly, this was indeed paradise. Hunger must be totally unknown here. He felt a moment of sadness when he reflected that this was a bounty he could not share with his people, for the desert-bred need to share to sustain life was still strong within him. But that sadness was swallowed by a greater sadness that he would never see any of them again, for about this he was quite certain. The magical means by which he had come to this place were too special to ever be repeated . . . at least by those whom he knew to be his own kind.

The shadows crawled across the grass and after a time the numbness passed, taking with it those emotions which had first bloomed here. However he had come to find this place it was, he realized, no less real than the desert world he had always known. Life was more proficient here, but hardly more tranquil. He had best maintain an alertness about him . . . and he had stayed in this single place too long already. For the first rule to observe in strange lands is to avoid complacency and to keep moving.

Dusk was approaching and he had not scouted his surroundings at all. He knew nothing about the

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beasts which might frequent this land, and nothing about its terrain. He stooped by the brook to wash himself and then moved out into the open grass to climb a nearby hill, from which he might survey the land.

It was a land of forests and meadows as far as the eye could see across the rolling hills, and it was a land profoundly alien to him therefore. Shades of green extended as far as the eye could see, and then yet further into a kind of greenish haze. He did not notice it at first, but the horizon seemed subtly *wrong*—too distant, somehow, too indistinct. The hills rolled into further hills and they into yet further hills, until at last they seemed piled up, one against the next, their contours and outlines blurring, merging into the thickness of the air at that great distance.

The air itself felt wrong. It was too heavy, thick with humidity and hazy in the near-distance, overlaying the landscape with pastel hues, lightening shadows into patches of blue. The sharpness and clarity to which he was accustomed was missing, as if a film of dust covered his eyes, blink them though he might.

And the sky—it was thick with clouds but not the purple clouds of violent desert storms. These were fleecy, puffy white clouds, streaked now with the golds and reds of dusk, darker in the east. There was an innocence to the appearance of everything upon which he looked which he did not trust.

He sat upon the hill until darkness fell. There was no moon, but when the clouds parted he thought at times he could see stars, faint and yellow, twinkling here and there, now and again, appearing and disappearing as if momentarily obscured by clouds too thin to be seen. He could find none of the familiar constellations, nothing that he could recognize.

But then, glancing down the hillside in the direction opposite from that in which he had come, he saw another light. It was unmistakably the light of a campfire.

Even as he recognized the fire for what it was, he felt two sharply conflicting emotions. The first was gladness, for a campfire meant people and until that moment he had not realized how lonely he was for the company of people, if not his own at least others with whom he might share this marvelous land. But then distrust and fear rose up to quell his sudden pleasure, for he knew not what kind of people might live here and it was not his nature to trust freely.

Still, the firelight was a beacon which called to him in compelling tones. He could not ignore it any more than he had been able to ignore the departure of the three wise strangers from his people's camp. He was, after all, yet a boy.

Thus it was that he rose and with a stealth and cunning as yet unused in this place he made his way down to the fire.

His route was not direct, for he had already marked the lay of the

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land while daylight lingered. He made a large and careful circle around the fire, discovering as he did so that it was located close by a road. The road was a narrow track, but here in this wilderness it stood out like an alien spirit, crying as it did of Man in a land that had shown until now few signs of Man. He had not glimpsed the road from the hill because it followed the lowlands, the creases between the hills, and was bordered on either side by bushrows, hidden between them like a secret ravine.

A stream also followed the same course, twisting in parallel with the road, and it was at a spot where the stream looped away from the road, creating an open glen between them, that a camp had been pitched and a fire burned brightly.

Close by the fire stood a high narrow wagon, its sides angling away from each other as they climbed to a peaked roof, the total visual effect being one of great topheaviness. Long Hand had never seen a wagon—nor even a wheel—and was greatly puzzled by it. He marked it at first as a peculiar hutch of some sort, wooden and clumsy. Grazing beyond the wagon was a great fat beast with long twisting horns. It was tethered to a nearby tree and had already devoured the grass close around the tree in a circle which it was now expanding outwards at a leisurely pace. It looked harmless.

Standing over the fire was a tripod from which was suspended a very large and very black pot. Long Hand knew of pots only as crockery of dubious strength and uncertain longevity and at this too he marvelled, for he had never seen so large a pot, nor ever one suspended so over a fire.

And next to the pot stood the woman, a ladle in her hand. She was fat and this too was new to Long Hand for none of his people had ever grown fat. Babies might be fat for a time with baby chubbiness, but babies were cared for and fed when no one else ate. To Long Hand the process went in only one direction: as one grew older one grew less fat, until in old age one's skin was like fine leather stretched over one's brittle bones.

"You over there," the woman said in a loud, clear, but still conversational voice, "are you hungry?"

Long Hand said nothing, but sank back into the shadows.

"Boy," the woman said, "is your tongue tied?"

She was not facing him; her profile was silhouetted against the fire. She had a large, sharply pointed nose and a thrusting chin. *How did she know he was there?*

"I can hear your mind, Boy," she said. She turned and looked directly at him, and although he knew he could not be visible to her, lying in the grass on his belly, her eyes gleamed with dancing points of fire and he knew that she saw him as clearly as if in broad daylight. "I mean you no harm," she said, her voice less strident. "You may as well be done with skulking."

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Feeling shamed, he rose from the grass and came hesitantly forward. He felt like a snared animal. "I'm not hungry," he said, but even as he said it the breeze shifted and brought to him the odor of the pot, and he realized that he was indeed hungry.

"Sit," she said, pointing to a three-legged stool near the fire.

He sat, and she went on: "You don't know who I am, do you, Boy?" She waddled to the wagon, the lower side of which was open, exposing a compartment with shelves inside. From one shelf she took two black bowls and brought them back to the fire. As she moved, she talked. "I'm Mother Wittles, and this is my wagon. I travel the countryside and everywhere I'm known for my fine magic." She leaned close to him, handing him a bowl full of thick, steaming stew. "I heal minds," she said. She handed him a spoon, which he held awkwardly in his left hand, unsure of its use.

"I had me a young girl, she was learning from me. But alas, she met a fine young man and went off with him and I've had no one to help me since. How about you, now? Would you like to come with me?" She began spooning the stew from her own bowl into her mouth, punctuating her conversation with loud slurping noises. Long Hand watched and then tried to do as she did. The stew was full of strange bits and pieces, some of them meat and some not, all in a rich brown gravy. It tasted very good.

"Why me?" Long Hand asked when he had finished the food in his bowl.

Mother Wittles looked him up and down. He was naked but she showed no surprise at this. He was thin but sinewy and his movements were the sure, fluid movements of a wild animal. His hair was black and stringy and fell below his shoulders. His skin was permanently darkened by the desert sun of his childhood and his eyes were everywhere, seeing everything.

"You are alone, Boy. You have no one here. And I am alone, with no one. I'm a lonely old woman and I need help. You stay with me and I'll teach you all you need to know. You need me, Boy."

He nodded. She was right; he was a stranger here in an unknown land of unknown people and customs. He did not understand this woman very well, but somehow he knew she meant him no harm, and her food was very good. "What do you want of me?" he asked.

"For tonight? Take your sleep—you can lie under the wagon if you like. Tomorrow I begin to teach you." She bobbed her head. "Done and done. We shall do well, I think. I like you."

He did as he had been bid and curled up in the grass under the wagon while the fat woman wheezed and made her way up the short ladder at one end of the wagon and disappeared inside. *I like you.* The words blazed themselves across his mind while he tried to fall asleep. His body was

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very tired, but sleep did not come. *I like you.* No one had ever said that to him before.

III

DAWN FOUND Long Hand sleeping fitfully under a bush close by the road, and soon thereafter Mother Wittles also found him there. She shook him, but not unkindly, and when he awoke she said nothing about his change of sleeping places. She understood: he could not sleep with the weight of the great wagon overhead.

They finished the stew for breakfast and then she set him to scouring the pot with sand in the nearby stream while she tended to her ox. "I want you to learn to take care of her; she's my Lollie and I've had her since she was a calf. Her milk's still good and she never stumbles." She showed him how the beast was hitched to the wagon and then how to stand at her head while she plodded slowly and stolidly up the narrow road. The ox moved more slowly than Long Hand found at first a comfortable pace and her hooves raised puffs of dust at each step, but he found himself falling gradually into her placid rhythm as he strode beside her. Mother Wittles, after walking with him a short distance, climbed wheezingly up to a bench which ran across the front end of the wagon and sat there, dust catching at the sweat on her face while the wagon creaked and jangled under her great bulk.

After a time she said, "We must think about clothes for you, Boy. They don't matter for much here in this country, but we'll be coming to a town in a while, and the people there are peculiar about clothing." Then she lapsed back into a doze.

The day was a curious one. Milky clouds covered great expanses of the sky, but yet sunshine fell warmly. The sun, when he glanced up at it, was fiery bright but seemed at times to hang *below* the clouds. Every so often the clouds parted and through them he could glimpse the sky. But the sky was not blue—not the clear, clean blue of the cloudless skies he had always known. Instead the blue was mottled, sometimes almost brownish, but always hazy and indistinct.

They stopped when the sun was overhead and Long Hand unhitched Lollie to let her graze while Mother Wittles fixed a cold meal for them which they ate in the shade of a large old tree. After they had eaten, while the old woman was rummaging in her wagon for "something you can wear, Boy," Long Hand tugged up a clump of sod and pulled from its roots more white juicy grubs for a final bit to eat. Mother Wittles poked her head from the wagon as he was eating a grub and called out, "What you eating, Boy? Is my food no good for you?"

Long Hand looked down at the sod he was still holding. "No, ma'am, I liked your food. I like these too."

"*Grubs?* Boy, Boy, what do you

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want with grubs?"

"They are good," Long Hand said.

"Are they, now?" she asked, climbing down the ladder to the ground. "Good to eat, are they? Give me one." She held out her hand.

Still not looking at her he pulled a grub loose and put it in her hand where it rolled and curled itself.

"Looks disgusting," the woman said. "But—" She popped it into her mouth with a grimace of anticipation. Slowly the expression changed to one of wonderment and surprise. She swallowed and looked sharply at Long Hand, who now returned her gaze. She nodded. "We both have something to learn, it seems," she said, and then turned back to the wagon to resume her rummaging.

THAT NIGHT after they had made camp and eaten, Long Hand found himself sitting at Mother Wittles' feet while she talked about her travels and the lands she had seen.

"This is a vast world, Boy," she said. "And no man knows the whole of it. I once met a man—he was *very* old—who claimed he'd been to the eastern edge. He was on a boat—you know what a boat is, Boy? Well, never you mind. You'll see one some day—and they sailed due east. Had some foolish notion of finding more land out there, he said, and who knows what riches such a land might hold? Not that we're altogether lacking, here—" and she waved her arm expansively.

"Anyway and also, they sailed due east, looking for the beginning of day, he said, and instead they came upon the World's End. A terrible noise, he said, and mist everywhere like a great falls, so that they couldn't see where they were heading until the mists parted and the lookout up above—that was the man I told you about, who told me this story; he was the lookout, up on the high mast—the lookout cried out in a terrible voice and told them to turn back at once, before they were swept over the edge.

"Well, you can imagine full well that I asked him what he'd seen, for 'Curiosity' was my name as a child and I was still then a young woman—and by no means as fat as I am today, either! And he told me—" she leaned forward, her eyes gleaming in the firelight with an intensity which reminded him of the night before when she had first called to him—"he told me he'd seen nothing but blackness. There was an edge, and water boiling and thundering there, and beyond the edge absolute blackness—like the dead of night!" She leaned back. "What do you think of that, eh?" she asked in sudden satisfaction.

"I do not know," Long Hand replied honestly. "Will I ever see the World's Edge for myself?"

She smiled. "As for that, I cannot say. But if he did not lie, it is there for any fool to find. You have only to return, to tell the tale. Ah, there's the rub: you have only to turn back!"

He glanced up at the night sky.

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The clouds, pearly in the night, had parted and directly above them he glimpsed lights. But strangely feeble, too dim for stars.

She followed his glance upwards. "Ah, the World Above," she said. "How often in my youth did I stare up at their lights and try to imagine myself in their world."

"The—'World Above'?" Long Hand asked hestitantly.

"Surely. You see their lights, there?"

"They are not stars?"

" 'Stars'? What are 'stars'?" the old woman asked.

Long Hand shook his head. "I—my father says they are the spirits of the Great Ones who have gone into the sky . . ."

"Ah, think of it for a moment, Boy. Think of it, picture it in your mind as clearly as clear you can. Do that for me . . ."

He tried to do as she requested, picturing in his mind the constellations his father had pointed out to him, the Warrior with his Knife at his Belt, the Great Bear, the Pole Star, the Wise Crone. He remembered lying on his back against stone still warm from the day, his father pointing upward with his finger, telling once again the story of the Warrior and the Bear and how they locked in immortal combat, dealing each a death blow and rising into the sky together.

"Enough, Boy," she said after a time, her voice subdued. "Enough. There is much strangeness here and I confess to you: at times like these I would that I was only what I seemed to be—a fat and foolish old woman, and nothing more. For what I have glimpsed there in your mind is troubling, very troubling to me . . ." Her voice trailed off into silence and she sat immobile, her gaze turned inward.

After a time she seemed to return to an awareness of Long Hand and she said to him, "Boy, I have the power to listen to your thoughts. It is not an easy thing, for thoughts are not like words but more like pictures, half-glimpsed, shadowy mostly, and not easily understood. I can hear a mind when it comes near me—even as I heard you yesterday when you first came upon me—and I can divine the feelings which lie uppermost in that mind, so that I can tell whether it is the mind of a friend or an enemy. For me to go deeper than that requires much of me—and the cooperation of he whose mind I am delving into. Do you understand? No? But you will. You will remember what I am telling you now and some day you will understand. Yes? When I asked you to think about these, ah, 'stars,' I was able to go into your mind and see them as you saw them, and . . . I was amazed. I can say no more. I *am* amazed. You are surely stranger than anyone I have ever met, for you are wholly of another world. You—you have much to teach me, Boy." Her voice was curiously humble and this more than what she had to say made Long Hand uneasy, for he was used to her bluff and ready manner, her air of competence and basic

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wisdom. Seeking now to return to her a mood he could deal with more easily, he asked,

"Tell me of the . . . World Above."

She shook herself, as if emerging from a troubling dream. "The World Above . . . ah, yes. It is all new to you, is it not? And very strange, as strange as your world would be for me. You have no world above, in that world from which you came?"

"No." He shook his head.

"Ah." She nodded. Then she gestured at the sky. "Many fools tell many tales of the World Above, but you can believe them at your own risk, for no one of whom I have ever heard has ever been there and returned to tell the tale. For all of that, there are men—they are called Scholars—who have spent their lives peering through lenses and speculating about the World Above, and they believe themselves wise indeed on the subject. I don't know; I'm only an old woman and my studies have always been directed elsewhere, for this is the world of the living and there is enough to know in this land without spending my time craning my neck to see the next. Still . . . the World Above . . .

"Here is what I know:

"In the sky above us is another world. It looks much like our own, although whether it truly is, no one can say for certain. But on very clear days, when the clouds are gone, you can see great lands, forests and plains, rivers and lakes and—from other parts of this land—you can see oceans too. It is like this:" She held one hand out flat, parallel to the ground, and then the other, over it, not touching, both hands parallel to each other. "This—" she wriggled the fingers of her lower hand—"this is our world, upon which we walk and live. And this—" she wriggled the fingers of her upper hand—"is the World Above. The sun moves between the two, shining its light upon them both, equally. Do you see?"

Long Hand stared at her hands and then up into the sky at the pale lights which winked and twinkled and were not stars. "Why don't they fall off?" he asked.

"Ah!" she laughed with delight. "Why indeed? That is a question many wise men have tried to answer—but none ever have. But yes, there must be people up there, people perhaps like ourselves, for with lenses and a clear sky one can glimpse roads and even cities, and the lights we can see at night come from those cities.

"There are those who say that the World Above is where we go when we die—and there are others who say that ours is where *they* go when *they* die. But I will tell you this: No one I have ever met will admit to a memory of that place, nor have I ever glimpsed such a memory in even my deepest excursions into a mind."

"Can they see us?"

"Who can say? If they look I should suppose they can see us as

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easily as we see them. But the sky is rarely clear, and even the sharpest and most powerful lenses have never revealed the sight of a man of that world. All is conjecture, Boy. Keep that in mind. Guesses—anyone may guess and some spend much of their time at guesswork, but guessing is all it is and all it can ever be. One might as easily sail off the edge of the world—and as profitably, too."

Long Hand gazed wonderingly up into the night sky and thought about the ever-unfolding marvels of this strange and fascinating land, and after a time Mother Wittles gathered herself up and climbed into her wagon for the night, leaving him to his thoughts.

IV

BEFORE THEY BROKE CAMP the next day, Mother Wittles brought out a wooden box from which she pulled articles of clothing. "It is important that we not offend the good townspeople, Boy," she said, her tone of practicality as fresh as ever and her speculations of the night before tucked carefully away. "I myself enjoy the sight of your young body, for it reminds me of when I was a girl and longed after the boys of my day, and you are well-made and want only for a little better feeding. But townspeople live clustered in houses crammed next to houses and it breeds in them a different nature. They must have strong rules by which to live—so many of them all together like that—and one of their rules is that one must always go clothed in public so as not to incite either lust or loathing in others. One keeps one's body a secret, to be shared with only those who are close. Ah, but you're too young, yet, Boy. You've yet to learn of these things . . ." And so saying, she began to fit him with a tunic which fell to his ankles, but which she began adjusting until it came only to his knees.

The cloth felt rough and constricting against his skin and it caught when he tried to move in it in his accustomed manner. "No," he cried in frustration. "I won't wear this thing!"

"You must. I know it binds—look at me! Look at these many folds of cloth with which I must conceal my body! Thank yourself that I have garbed you much more lightly."

"But it's hot and it makes me itch."

"No matter. You must learn to adjust to it. This is a land in which most people wear clothes, Boy. You are a strangeling and were you to go entirely without clothes I could not answer for your safety. Trust me. Do this thing for me. See for yourself when we reach the town."

"All right," Long Hand said sullenly, "but I will not like it."

AND HE LIKED the town no better when they reached it in midafternoon. His skin felt raw and abraded, especially on the

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shoulders, and the hot sun made sweat trickle down his back, dampening the fabric of the tunic where it was gathered at his waist and making it stick to him unpleasantly. His mood was dark and rebellious. He was prepared to see this "town" for himself and then he had every intention of leaving both the town and Mother Wittles far behind. If people required of one that clothes be worn, he could do easily without those people. He liked Mother Wittles and knew that she had much to teach him, but he knew he could live without her. Game was plentiful—he had trapped a rabbit for their noontime meal—and life was not hard here. The open countryside beckoned and never more so than when they crested a hill, he at Lollie's head, plodding in the dust, and below them he first saw the town.

He looked down into a valley carved by a modest river—yet the largest he had ever seen—which looped back and forth upon itself across the valley floor, old and placid. Near the mouth of the valley the river cut through steepening banks and upon those banks, joined by stone-arched bridges, perched the town. The buildings were close-set upon each other, several storeys tall, and built of stone. Their roofs were steep and slate-grey and they sat in a jumble that climbed like steps up each bank away from the river. Beyond the town the valley was divided into a patchwork quilt of farms and fields, dotted here and there with herds of grazing animals.

The town looked ugly to Long Hand's eyes—an open wound upon the fertile land, jutting angles and sharp lines against the rolling greens of the hills and valley. He wanted then to turn and run away.

"Boy! Mind Lollie now!" The ox was lumbering into a faster shuffle as the road dipped sharply down, and he heard the squeal of the wagon's brakes as Mother Wittles hauled back upon the great lever. Hastily he grabbed for the ox's harness and pulled her head down, slowing her pace, and thereafter he was too occupied with the narrow twisting road and its descent to the town to think further of escape.

Although this road seemed less travelled than the road which led out of the town and into the valley beyond, it was not empty of traffic. Long Hand had scarcely time to marvel over the nature of the road's other travellers for fending with the ox and avoiding his own trampling by the beasts he met hauling their burdens up the hill. The ox, until now placid and agreeable of nature, had turned skittish and uneasy, the odors of the town and other beasts calling forth new responses from that sluggish brain. When a cur dog raced out into the road from a side dwelling, to yap at the ox's heels and race yelping in circles around Long Hand, he found himself too beset to do more than cope with each changing moment—and thus it was that he found himself, quite to his surprise, in the narrow canyon of the town's main street

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without any conscious memory of how he came to be there.

The street was paved with large irregular and much worn stones, set in random patterns and each a danger to easily stubbed toes. The stones were covered here and there with animal manure, not all of which he could avoid, and a gutter down the center carried a trickle of foul-smelling water, or something like water. The buildings rose directly from the edges of the street, tall stone walls set with narrow windows, some of them shuttered. While he stared about him him a shutter popped open and a woman's red face and beshawled shoulders appeared for a moment. She was holding a pot and she threw its contents with great accuracy into the center of the street, where it landed in the gutter and was gradually washed along.

Mother Wittles had brought them to a halt before a building over the door of which hung a painted wooden board. On the board was painted a large speckled bird. "Here we are, now," the old woman said. And then she called out, "Silas!"

A small man with a bald head appeared in the doorway under the sign of the speckled bird. "Ah, Mother Wittles!" he cried, rubbing his hands into an apron which was tied at his waist. It was, Long Hand thought, more likely that he was cleaning the cloth with his hands than the reverse.

"Have you room, Silas?" Mother Wittles asked.

"Ah, it's coming on festival time, you know," the other replied. Then, more quickly, "But we always have a room for you, Mother." He inclined his head to one side. "Have your boy take your wagon around back. Will you be staying with us long?"

"As long as I'm needed," she wheezed, descending from the wagon. She followed the man into the inn, leaving Long Hand standing alone in the street with the ox and wagon.

"HELLO. Are you Mother Wittles' new boy?"

Long Hand whirled at the words and found a girl standing close by. She had long golden hair, the color of sunshine, that framed an oval face, two wide-set blue eyes, a button nose and a wide mouth. The words were friendly and she was smiling. She wore a long robe-like garment which fell to her feet and was soiled at the hem. She was young; she stood a head shorter than he and stared up at him approvingly. She seemed to him more beautiful than anyone he had ever known; the sight of her tied his emotions in knots. He could only nod dumbly.

"Do you know the way to the stables?"

He shook his head, still unable to speak.

"Shall I show you the way? My name is Joy—what's yours?"

He nodded again, then mumbled, "I have no proper name yet."

"What does Mother Wittles call

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you?" she asked as she came around him to take the ox's head and lead it.

"Boy," he said. He had come to think of it as a name as good as the one he had known before.

The girl laughed. "Joy and Boy! No, I shan't call you that. —This way!— Have you no other name?" She led them into a narrow way between two buildings. Above them the upper storeys of the buildings touched, leaving an arched tunnel for an alley. The smell was even worse here than in the street.

"I was once known as Long Hand," he admitted. The arched alley debauched onto a maze of twisting backways which lent access to the rear of the buildings.

"No," she said, "that's too long." She laughed at her pun. "I'll call you Hand . . . Hans . . . yes, Hans! Do you like that?"

"If you wish."

She drew them up at the rambling stables which extended behind the inn. Hay was pitched in a high mound and scattered across the paving. The smells of animals were stronger here than the other smells, for which he was grateful. And a hostler came ambling out as he began unhitching the ox. The hostler said nothing, but when the ox was free, pointed to a stall which was freshly prepared. The wagon stayed in the open courtyard. While Long Hand worked the girl kept up a running line of friendly chatter and when he had finished and the ox was in her stall Joy said, "What will you do now?"

"I don't know."

"Then come with me. I'll show you the town and we can fish in the river and—does she need you?"

"Need me? I don't know."

"I mean in her work. Are you studying with her?"

He shook his head. "No . . . I don't know . . ."

"Then you can come with me. All right?"

THE TOWN took on a different hue in the light of the setting sun, sitting on the stone river wall with the girl, dangling lines into the murky water for fish which she assured him were really there, "Only, they're not biting right now." Long Hand had never fished, never seen a fish and never eaten one, but he knew now that whatever this girl asked of him he would do.

They had roamed the narrow streets together, climbed the opposite hill after crossing one of the bridges (he wondered what held the bridge up and why it did not collapse into the river), poked their noses into shops where things were made and sold, and through it all she had chattered gaily, telling him the names of every shopkeeper and the habits of each, telling stories about the name of each shop and how it had been acquired, and obviously eager to be with him, talk to him, and make him laugh.

Long Hand did not laugh easily. He was not so much dour as solemn. Life as he had always lived it was not something to be laughed at. Laughter was a release—when

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you thought your snares had failed and you would go hungry and then you found you were wrong: you laughed. When rain came after a drought, you laughed. Good fortune brought laughter, but good fortune is not common in a desert nomad's existence.

Joy laughed easily and often. She laughed to see people doing their chores. She laughed with pleasure at Long Hand's amazement with the town. She laughed at her own jokes. He came to think of her as like sunshine. She was well named.

And when dusk fell, she led him back across a bridge and through the twisting lookalike streets until quite to his surprise they stood before the sign of the speckled bird. They returned empty-handed, having caught no fish, but she still laughed as she led him into the warmly lit interior of the inn.

"Ah, there you are, Joy," said the man, Silas, as they entered. He looked disapprovingly at Long Hand. "Your mother needs you in the kitchen. Go now." He turned his back on them, then looked back over his shoulder. "And you, boy, your place is the stables. Be gone."

Had Silas thus addressed him on his arrival here, Long Hand would have retreated in dismay. But Joy had told him about her father—"He barks worse than he bites!"—and he now summoned the courage to ask, "Where is Mother Wittles?"

Silas did not pause in his retreat from the room. "If she needs you, she'll send for you." Then he was gone.

Long Hand stared uneasily after the man. The oppressive atmosphere he had felt when he first saw the town began to settle over him once more.

"Hey?" It was a whisper. Joy was still at his side. "I'll take you up to Mother Wittles' room. I know which one it is; she is always given the front parlor. Come."

He followed her gratefully through another door and up a broad stair which opened onto a dark hallway lit with candles. She led the way down to the end of the hall and scratched on the door there.

"Enter," called a muffled voice. The girl twisted the door handle and pushed into the room beyond, taking Long Hand by the hand and pulling him after her.

The room was unlike anything he had been prepared for. Its walls were heavily draped and no windows were visible. In the center of the room sat a heavy chair, flanked with floorstands upon which stood sets of burning candles at eye level. The room was thick with a heavy, musk-like scent. On the chair sat Mother Wittles, garbed in robes finer than any he had seen her wear before, rich with embroidery and touches of color. The old woman looked tired and wan, her features heavy with wrinkles. But the sight of Long Hand and the girl seemed to cheer her, for her face lit and she said, "My children—have you been enjoying yourselves?"

Long Hand nodded mutely while Joy launched into a detailed reci-

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tation of all they had done, only to be cut short after a polite pause by the old woman's raised hand.

"I am sure of it, my dear. I have only to listen to your mind—it babbles like a brook. But you, Boy, you are troubled?"

"I do not like it here."

"But Hans—!" the girl remonstrated.

"Hush, girl," Mother Wittles said gently. "I am sure he meant you no offense, but my boy is unused to these places and the people who live here. I was pleased to trust him to your care, for I know yours to be an untroubled spirit and I knew you would enjoy each other's company.

"You are not displeased with Joy, are you, Boy?"

"No."

"I thought not. What bothers you, then?"

He hung his head, but his thoughts told his feelings clearly and he knew she could hear them.

"Ah," she said then. "I see. Boy, my business keeps me here until the festival ends, but I have no need to keep you penned in here. Let me count the days . . ." She pulled at her fingers, one by one. "I shall be here for ten days." She held up both hands, fingers splayed. "Do you go out into the countryside in the direction from which we came, which is wild and unused, and content yourself for ten days. Then return."

He nodded. "Thank you."

She smiled then, a warm and protective smile. Then, to Joy, who had stood silent the while, "He is like an untamed beast who comes into one's camp for food and company but cannot stand to be penned or caged. This place is like a cage to him; it oppresses him. Go with him. Take him back up the eastern road a ways. Stay with him for a while if you will. I will speak to your mother."

V

THEY WALKED up the road to the hill in silence, Joy subdued. The night was dark—this world knew no moon—and after he stumbled once on the rough paving stones she took his hand, to steady him and guide him and perhaps to draw strength from him. They walked in silence, but each felt curiously close to the other. The time for words had passed.

The paving stones gave way to gravel, and the gravel to rutted dust and at last they stood on the brim of the hill where he had first seen the town. They turned to look back down and the town looked more cheerful than it had before, lit with occasionally moving torches and windows which spilled their light upon the streets.

"I must go back now," she said in a small voice.

"Not yet," he said. "She said you might stay for a while."

"She is so very good, you know," Joy said. "I wish she was *my* mother."

He said nothing, but squeezed her hand a little. Then they turned and

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continued for a way along the road.

They did not go far before he led them away from the road and down into a copse of trees which he had seen that morning. Here he gathered grass and laid it down upon a spot, building a nest around them, half aware of the significance of what he was doing, half remembering the customs among his people—customs the meaning of which he had yet to learn.

And there they sat together, still in silence, unwilling to part but uncertain of what to do.

At last he broke the silence, pointing up past the opening of the trees at the sky and saying, "Do you think about the World Above?"

She sighed and leaned back until her head was in his lap and she was staring directly up. The sky was milky with clouds but a dark rift hung above. He fancied he saw a light twinkle there for a moment and then disappear. He missed the stars.

"Yes," she said at last. "I think about it often. I wonder about the people who live there and the adventures they must have. I think I should like to be there—wouldn't you?"

He shook his head and said "I think this world is full of adventures."

"Not for me."

"But you live in the town and so much happens there."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I have lived there all my life and never gone farther than this. I like the town, but it has no adventures for me."

"What sort of adventures do you wish?"

Her face was dark and her expression hidden, but she reached up to him with her arms and pulled his head down, bending him almost double. He felt his nose graze hers and a strange tingle began to spread through his body. Then she pulled him closer and her lips found his.

Her lips were very soft even as they nibbled at his mouth. He opened his mouth in wonder, then returned her nibbles. "You've never kissed before, have you, Hans?" she asked in a whisper.

"No."

"I'll show you how," she said.

"Is—is this 'adventure'?"

"I don't know. I've never tried it before."

"I like it."

"Me too." Then, after a pause, she whispered, "Am I hurting you, bending you like that?" For her head was in his lap and to kiss her he had to bend upon himself.

"No, but I wish I was free of this awful clothing."

"Do you not like clothes?"

"Until today I had never worn any."

"Does it chafe?"

"It hurts my shoulders. They feel raw."

"Take it off, then."

He did, and they rearranged themselves in the darkness, side by side.

"Now *I* don't feel comfortable," she said, with a rueful laugh. "The

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night is too warm." She sat up and began removing her own clothes, her motions more audible than visible in the night gloom. "There, that feels better. Oh, feel the soft breeze!"

They lay again, side by side, staring up into the night. The clouds parted again and quite clearly both saw the light.

"Oh, look!" she cried. The light disappeared, then flashed on again, flashing on and off with a staccatto rhythm as they watched. "What can it mean?" she asked.

"It is new to you too?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"I think they must be trying to tell us something," he said.

"But what?"

"I don't know. That they are alive. That they are there."

"Real people?"

"Don't you think so?"

"I don't know. How can you tell?"

"Maybe those flashes are meant to speak to us. They aren't all the same, do you see? Some are much longer, some very short."

"But how can we know what they mean, really and truly, I mean?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe the Scholars know."

"In the cities? Perhaps you're right. Do you think they can see it?"

He smiled into the darkness. "I don't know," he said. And then the clouds moved together again and the light was gone.

"I must go soon."

"Not yet," he said.

"They will miss me soon."

"I will miss you when you go."

"Will you?" she giggled. "Would you like to kiss me again?"

"Yes."

"Ahhh . . . You are learning . . ."

His hand brushed against her chest and he found what the clothes had concealed. A tremor ran through her as his hand touched her breast. Alarmed, he pulled it away.

"No, don't stop. Please . . ."

They touched each other then and he marvelled at the firm softness of her skin, as she in turn touched his muscled strength with wonder and pleasure. Children still, they explored each others' bodies with excitement uncoupled with passion, but then returned to kissing and were overcome with a desire new to them each.

MUCH LATER he helped her don her clothes and walked with her on shaky legs to the place where the road looked down upon the town, and there they held each other for a long moment which neither wanted to end.

"I'll come here tomorrow," she said, breathlessly.

"It is tomorrow."

"Later today, then," she laughed. "In the afternoon. Will you be here."

"Yes," he said. "Every day, for ten days."

"Goodnight, Hans."

"Goodnight."

He watched her slim figure disap-

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pear down the road into the darkness and then turned to retrace his steps to the nest he had made. The darkness was alive with sounds, night birds calling, crickets chirping, and the rustling passage of other small animals. His senses seemed accutely tuned so that he could hear each sound as a separate voice, and all were singing to him.

Her scent was in the nest and he found there an undergarment she had forgotten. He started to his feet with it, then sank back, holding it close against his cheek. His emotions roiled; his memories were full of the sensations of her body, her movements, her cries of pain and passion. He felt transcendant, grown larger, older, wiser. No longer a boy. No longer Boy.

He rolled over onto his back and stared up at a rift in the clouds. ". . . And another world, above . . ." he murmurred, and fell blissfully asleep.

—TED WHITE

The Earth (cont. from page 49)

fer."

Jonker nodded and heaved the sigh of a man suddenly at peace. "Yes . . . but our real hope lies somewhere under the sand in a saddlepack . . . and twenty thousand years in the future."

—HOWARD L. MYERS

Alien (cont. from page 51)

air. "Won't leave that umbrella," he said. "Won't leave those smiles, or that love, or any kind words behind. Get out of my way. Just get out of my way, get, get! I've taken power; I've taken speed! For leaving, what else could I need?"

Then he went like a blast of cold light, shot toward the red signals, through the green signals and down and down the road. He went in the cold glare farther than anyone else, farther than they could go, farther than any one of them could ever go—fast, fast, fast.

He had seen, finally, how truly alien was his dream, how truly hopeless was his hope.

Now he too was trying to get away.

—DAVID R. BUNCH

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Arcana made her debut in our September issue ("A Witch in Time") in an unusual blend of fantasy and adventure. Now Janet Fox brings the witch-girl back for a new adventure in the northern climes, where she finds herself dubbed the—

SHE-BEAR

JANET FOX

Illustrated by MIKE KALUTA

THE BOULDERS that stopped the cave's mouth were green with moss and the skeleton roots of a dead tree extruded from the debris like a beggar's hand. The tall, sturdily-built girl rubbed a bleeding hand across her forehead, wet with perspiration even with the thin layers of snow that powdered the iron ground. Only strong arms could have moved the last boulder blocking the cave entrance, but slowly, it rocked backward, fell with a crash into a pile of debris.

The girl peered into the waiting darkness. "It's here, just as the wizard promised," she said, speaking as if only to a row of gaunt pines bowing in the sharp wind. A white snow-pony, furred like an angora, lifted its coarse head and snorted as if to acknowledge her remark. She entered the cave, bending low because of her extreme height. The cave wound far back into the hillside, becoming darker and darker, but she advanced quickly, holding high a guttering torch, sure that the cave offered nothing more substantial to fear than ghosts.

In the innermost chamber she found what she was seeking. A rude bier on which lay the forgotten relics of a man. Though like any man he had fallen to dust and bone, she knew that this had been no ordinary man, but AEthrid, ancient champion and king of a long-forgotten people. Her torch lit the sides of the vault: a terse line of runes, the delicate work of generations of spiders and yes, that for which she was searching, a sword with a hilt wrought in the form of a dragon. Its blade was enveloped in a sheath of greenish, rotted leather, but when she drew it out, she saw that the blade was a length of leaping light—Ao, the sword of AEthrid into which the warrior-king's soul had fled at his death.

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Touching the gleaming steel, the girl believed that the sword did possess the king's soul, and was impatient for battle after hanging here for centuries.

She drew her own crudely-made sword from the sheath at her side and replaced it with the dragon-blade. When she again reached the cave-mouth, the wind hit her with a stinging gust that carried in it a volley of snow crystals. "Look," she shouted against the wind, waving the beautiful sword in mock combat like a boy playing at war. "I have the magic blade. It was there, even as the Old Gray Man said."

The pony-stallion turned his head sideways as if to look, but his eyes were as empty and colorless as ice.

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting that you can't see me, but I still think that was the wisest course." As she spoke she was strapping a clumsy saddle of bear-hide on the stallion's back. The bridle was as primitively made, except that the bit of carved bone bore the sign of the pentagram. The wind was beginning to scream and strike at the pines under a sky like grimy rags.

The storm increased as she rode, snow piling up until the blind stallion had to flounder through drifts to his shoulders. The girl had wrapped herself in a black bearskin, but snow flew so fiercely that at times she was as blind as the stallion. They stopped in the poor

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shelter of some stunted trees and waited for the storm to let up. The girl dozed and shivered intermittently, and when she awoke it was to a weird world of twisted snow-shapes and blue shadows. "Daemon, we're lost," she said.

"No more than I would have expected," said a resonant voice that came from somewhere in the general vicinity of the snow-stallion.

"We'll have go find some better shelter before night falls. Wolfpacks will be hunting."

They broke their way grimly through the snowcrust. As Arcana looked up, she saw a thin blue line of smoke rising hesitantly on the wind. "I see smoke. A village or . . ."

"The luck of witches."

As they approached the smoke-plume they scrambled up a rock-strewn incline and came out onto a stony plateau swept almost clean of snow by the wind. The stallion's feet made hollow, echoing sounds. Suddenly a shout brought them to a stop. "Who dares to approach the camp of the wolf-brothers clan?"

"I am called Arcana. I have lost my way and ask a night of shelter in your camp."

Two men mounted on scrubby, lean ponies rode out into the open. They were bearded and their cloaks were of gray wolf fur. "She is a woman alone," said one. "She can mean no harm."

"Yes," said the other, his face made individual if not attractive by a puckered scar running the length of it from shaggy blonde hair to shaggy beard. "A woman who rides alone. No woman rides this country alone, fool!" He grabbed the stallion's bridle roughly so that it half reared. The bear-skin slipped from Arcana's shoulders and the scarred man whistled through crooked teeth. She was young with the healthy skin of youth. Her hair was a bare shade more golden than the snow, thick and bound only with a leather thong around her forehead. A figure in proportion to her height was not even half-concealed under the leather tunic.

"I ask only for safe passage to your village," repeated Arcana. The stallion snapped out at the man, but his long ivory teeth clicked only on air.

"She's mine first," said the scarred man, jumping off his horse and with a sudden movement bringing Arcana down out of the saddle. "Doubtless there'll be enough for you, too. She's a strapping girl."

Arcana scrambled to her feet, reaching for the dragonsword. It had a clean radiance as it reflected the snowscape, and it moved, even in Arcana's young, inexperienced hand with a practiced deftness.

"The slut has a blade," said the Scar, almost choking with laughter.

"So do you. Defend yourself."

The Scar looked down at his own

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weapon and there was a look of surprise on his face to see himself drawing it. At first Arcana was pressed back under the clashing strokes of the sentinel, but after a few moments the skill of the sword began to make up for her lack of strength. The Scar swore loudly when he realized that he was getting the worst of it. The point of Ao opened a wound on his cheek and another high on the chest.

"Yield, I ask only passage to your village—no more than that."

"She offers you your life," taunted the Scar's companion.

He seemed to go crazy, windmilling his sword with reckless blows. Arcana's lips became a line as she defended herself. She was driven back, a poorly aimed blow slashed the leather tunic, bounced off and opened a gash in her thigh. He was driving her back toward the rocky hillside where footing was unsure. The sword in her hand seemed to be thrumming in anticipation of the deathblow, yet she was reluctant to give it. Blood streamed down the man's distorted face and his eyes were insane with rage.

A treacherous stone slipped beneath her foot and she went to one knee, the man's sword singing at her head. Swiftly the dragon-blade caught the hurtling weapon with a shock and a clang, then before she knew it she had aimed Ao right at the hollow of the madman's throat and it was severing gristle and flesh and bone and wallowing in an outgush of blood that steamed in the cold air.

Arcana pulled the sword from the collapsing body and turned to the other man, unaware that the hunger for blood showed in her face until she had translated the fear reflected on his.

"I will take you to the camp if you still wish to go. Urbik may not be well pleased to know that yet another of his warriors has been slain."

"I must go there. Night is approaching and it's beginning to snow again."

Arcana helped the sentry tie the Scar's body onto his horse. She didn't like the cold lax touch of his flesh or the loose way his head hung against the horse's side. As she looked down the two green jewels in the dragon's eyesockets caught the light and bounced it back.

The camp had a dirty, temporary look to it. Children, some of them naked, frolicked in the snow with half-wild wolf cubs. Women and children followed inquisitively as the party entered. A tent-flap gaped and a strongly-built old man appeared. "I am Urbik, chief of the wolf-brothers clan. What has happened to my man and who is this stranger?"

"He was killed by this . . . female . . . in fair combat. You should have seen her rend him, like

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a she-bear . . ." The man began to retell the fight blow for blow while Arcana waited to get a word in.

The chief seemed engrossed by the tale, even as he was angered by the loss of his man.

"My name is Arcana and I come from—"

"You are henceforward to be known as the She-bear," roared the old man. There was a cry of anger and someone entered the circle that the firelight incised. Arcana saw a young man, only thinly bearded but handsomely made. "I demand the law of challenge," he shouted.

Arcana looked to the old man.

"He is right to challenge you," said Urbik. "It was his brother you killed."

"This is the one you have called She-bear?" asked the youth. He looked at her in an insolent manner which she tried to return in kind, while feeling disconcerted by the stare of his light-colored eyes. "Be she woman or troll-hag, I'll kill her!" He spat into the fire and walked away.

"The challenge will be met at first light," said the old man. "At morning the fangs of the She-bear may be drawn, Harl is an excellent fighter despite his youth. But this night you will feast and drink with us as a welcome guest. You will find us as hospitable people with such means as we have since the troll killed our best fighting men and drove us from our village."

"A troll?"

"Yes, it is said he keeps a hoard of buried treasure."

"I have come seeking a troll on a mission for the Old Gray Man."

"A wizard!"

"Some say he is, but he is a clever old man; perhaps he only wishes them to believe in magic. I need not more magic than I find in my good sword."

"Well spoken, She-bear." He clapped her on the back in a painful gesture of friendship.

Arcana slipped out of the tent by night and to the field where the horses were tethered.

"Hsst, Daemon."

The white horse stopped grazing, a statue splashed with silver and dappled with shadows.

"I have found the troll we are seeking."

"Good, I tire of eating grass."

"It sweetens your breath."

The stallion's hind hoof probed the darkness with a badly aimed kick. Arcana laughed, unmoving. "Remember, you need my spell to remove you from the horse's body. All goes well . . . only . . . I have a challenge to meet in the morning."

"You have AEthrid's blade and soul. Kill whoever it is."

"Yes, I suppose I shall, but . . ."

"Well?"

"It's nothing, only he's so young; I hate to—"

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The daemon's laughter set the tethered horses to prancing. "Sometimes, Arcana, I almost suspect you of being a woman. I know without eyes that he is good to look at as well as young. A very interesting dilemma."

The echo of the daemon's chuckle followed her back to the tent where she sat awake wrapped in the warm hide of her new namesake.

Morning was manifest as a fiery line of light around the edge of the tent flap. More snow during the early morning had softened all angles. Arcana's feet moved reluctantly on velvet as she approached the center of camp where the combat was to be held. Harl was already there, putting on his crude leather armor. He gave Arcana a look as she entered the circle of tribesmen, a look of unbelief that he had actually challenged a girl. She waited for him to speak, but he closed his lips firmly. Apparently a challenge was taken seriously by these people.

Urbik looked up into the clearing sky and addressed some unseen being in an appropriately grave tone of voice. When he returned to the real world, he gave a curt nod and stepped back.

Harl began the fight with a few tentative strokes, not those of a determined fighter. He didn't seem to have much heart for the fight. Ao was, as always, ready. It made a neat incision in Harl's forearm. The wound made him livelier; he dealt a series of rapid blows that nearly sent the dragonsword flying from her hand. Her defense was slow; she thought that he was going to hold back from this opening, then decision hardened his face and he struck. If Arcana had not moved aside the blade would have penetrated leather and breast and heart, but it only went sizzling through along her ribs, drawing a thread of blood. He was not playing; he would kill her if he could. The sword felt anger and sliced out in a set of intricate and clever maneuvers that Arcana could never have conceived. But Harl was skillful, too, and the battle went on, much to the joy of the onlookers. In the struggle to stay alive, Arcana forgot who she was. She was fierce and dirty and sticky with her own blood. She was the She-bear they cheered on, and she wanted one thing: to kill, and then to fall down somewhere and rest. When her soul seemed inseparable from the ancient one in the dragonsword, the blade became cleverer still and like the fangs of a serpent it inflicted a small wound, yet one that might prove fatal, for this wound was in Harl's swordhand. The hand lost its hold on the weapon and Harl was totally helpless before the deaththrust of Ao. The blade leaped forward as of its own accord, but at the last second she realized that it was pro-

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pelled only by her arm. The strength suddenly left that arm; it dropped to her side as if weighted.

"What's the matter with you," taunted Harl and all the rest were begging the She-bear to strike. They might attack her in their fury and kill her to satisfy their need for someone's death.

Harl had picked up his sword and was looking at her as if he'd like to send it slicing toward her throat, but he threw it from him as hard as he could. "No! I have been defeated by a woman. I am nothing."

"You spared his life," said Urbik. "Does this mean you claim him as your thrall?"

"What? No."

"Then you must kill him."

"Well, then I so claim him. Whatever you say."

Harl was made to kneel at her feet. He was alive, but she did not like to meet the anger and loathing she saw in his face. "Only one who understands cruelty in its fullest measure would do to me what you have done. And to hold back your sword . . . to let me live."

Arcana was again confronted with those green glittering dragoneyes, and she wished she could throw the sword far from her, but it slipped into the sheath at her side as if it had willed itself there.

Numbly she went from the circle of combat and let the women help her clean and bandage her wounds. They were silent and looked at her with awe, for they had never heard of a woman who fought with a sword.

After an hour of uneasy sleep, Arcana prepared for the journey. She had dreamed of bears as big as mountains lying in wait and smiling with their monstrous jaws. Harl waited for her on his smoke-gray pony, and she noticed that a collar of metal had been placed around his throat.

"You have a guide as well as a bondsman," roared Urbik as she left. "May you go to meet wyrd with a steady eye and swordhand, She-bear."

They rode in silence, Harl taking the lead and ranging far ahead. "He is mightily silent, witch. One might expect him to accept defeat more gracefully, even as I have."

"You are a daemon; Odin alone knows what goes on in your head. He is a man."

The stallion rose on his hind legs and plunged, bawling angrily, but being blind he stepped too far sideways and had to scramble not to slide down into a slough. Arcana managed to turn him back onto the path. "Remember," hissed Arcana, "if you die in this body you are likely to roam the dimensions forever in search of your own."

"You will wish you had brought along your love potions."

"I think even those would be useless in this case," replied Ar-

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cana. "but we will be long on this quest and the nights hereabouts seem very black and lonely."

The sun set its harsh, golden-red seal upon the crust of the snow as Arcana bathed in an ice-edged pool. Only a member of a hardy race could have sung and splashed in that water. She crushed the needles of the pine trees against her skin for the closest thing she could come to perfume. When her body was dry and beginning to regain its color, she put on the tunic of strange slick stuff she had stolen from one of the treasure-chambers in the Old Gray Man's Hall. It was thin cloth, the whole garment capable of being compressed into the hand (that being the way she had stolen it) and the pattern and color was that of a peacock's tail (only she had no idea of what a peacock was and to her the pattern was rich and strange). She knew that the daemon would have laughed to see her, but she had tethered him beyond a stand of trees. "I hope the wolves get him."

Harl was a lump of darkness just out of the range of the firelight, sitting in a posture of defeat with his head resting on his knees. Arcana hurried to the fire just in time to save the rabbit she had snared from getting overdone.

"Don't you want something to eat?"

"No."

"If you don't eat, you won't be able to travel or fight if need be."

Harl rose slowly. "I would not lose my value to you as a thrall." As they ate, darkness enclosed them in a ring of firelight and wolfpacks began worrying the immense silence with unlovely soprano voices. Arcana became aware that Harl was watching her closely and smiling, only it was a smile of bitterness. She suddenly felt a great fool, a she-bear dancing clumsily with a rose clutched between her fangs. She tore at the meat angrily with her teeth.

"I am a woman, after all. Is it so wrong for me to appear as one?" She tossed the bone into darkness with an abrupt gesture.

"No, not wrong, only, you do seem at a loss without your weapon. It's such a part of you I'd have expected that you even wear it to bed."

Arcana was silent, pretending not to hear.

"Did you think I could take a warrior to my bed, one who has taken away my freedom, my honor, my life?"

"I wouldn't have, had I been given a choice," said Arcana, feeling a sense of futility that brought her dangerously near to tears.

"Well, all is within your power, mistress. If you would have me to your bed, command me. A thrall has only to obey."

"Perhaps I *shall* so command

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you," said Arcana, trying to whip up the pride that had always been so strong in her. But she knew that she could answer so boldly and stand with her head up for only a few more seconds. She stood for those seconds, glaring at him, then turned and fled the circle of combat. Miserably hunched in the foul-smelling bearskin far from the fire, she spent the night, again wakeful with only the far-off voices of wolves for companionship.

"How did you fare last night, witch?" asked the daemon as they rode under a threatening sky.

"It was a pleasant enough night," she replied.

The demon laughed. "Your lover rides far ahead; he seems not to wish to speak of love this morning, nor to speak at all. Ouch!"

Arcana had drawn back rudely on the bit. "Mind your tongue. Remember who holds the reins."

"Yes, a she-bear with a very short temper."

Two more nights were spent similarly to the first. Arcana wished fervently that the quest were over, but the snow-covered trails seemed to lie endlessly before them.

At last they entered the village deserted by Harl's people. The neatly-made houses breathed an air of neglect and decay. Rats and other small animals used them as shelter, scampering in and out of the ruined doors. Harl went into one of the houses and looked around at the damage that time and weather had done. "This was my father's," he said. "He was killed by the troll. As we probably soon will be. The troll haunts this place."

"Don't fear him. I have a friend who's a match for any troll."

"Maybe you'd better call on your friend now," said Harl as the sound of loud shuffling footsteps came to them. There was a series of gutteral noises, evidently meant to be an inquiry. Arcana stepped into the doorway just as the troll appeared from behind a house, putting a hole in the wall as he passed with a square blow from a knotted fist, ugly as a buried tree root. The thing stood about thirteen or fourteen feet high as nearly as Arcana could reckon. It carried itself in a ponderous manner with immense humped shoulders and barrel-shaped trunk teetering above short bowed legs. The face was obscured by a scraggy patch of hair, mottled gray and black and yellow; the eyes were little chips of broken yellow glass.

Arcana lifted her hands above her head and her fingers wove in air the pattern that accompanied the releasing spell which she spoke. The stallion reared and pawed the air. And nothing happened.

"Daemon, what's wrong?"

"I don't know, but the spell's not working. I can't change back into my own form."

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Arcana wove the spell again as the troll loomed over her. "There's an aura about this place that counteracts my magic. Harl, get your sword. It's on my saddle." She was already whipping Ao from its sheath. The troll grinned stupidly as it reached for Arcana with an immense, thinly furred hand. Ao bit into the shoulder where the sinews writhed like worms. The strength of the troll was such that Arcana and her sword were sent flying through the air to crash into the side of one of the houses. As she lay there stunned the troll raised one huge foot above her head. By this time Harl had his sword and was attacking from behind, making a telling jab into the monster's buttocks, but it did little real damage except to enrage the troll who gave a fierce howl and caught Harl in both big hands and started to squeeze.

Harl's face was turning dark and blood began to splotch his lips. Arcana had staggered to her feet, the village ebbing and flowing in her blurred vision. A white blur thrust itself toward the troll, striking with all its weight against the bandy legs and toppling the monster. It opened its hands to catch itself and Harl was spilled out. Arcana went to help him to his feet as the pony stallion danced on nervous hooves just out of the angered monster's grasp. "Daemon, if you die in the body of the horse . . ."

"I'll haunt you beyond all time and space," shouted the daemon, and went crashing down in the ruins of a destroyed house. The fist came down once, twice; the stallion screamed.

"We must fight as equals now," said Arcana as she unfastened the collar from Harl's neck. They moved in as quickly as their bruised bodies would let them, one at each side. "We'll have but one chance," warned Arcana. "While his attention is on the horse. Now!"

Arcana felt the sword vibrating against her hand, happier than it had ever been. They threw themselves forward at the same moment, feeling like insects stalking a bird. Harl's sword struck bone and snapped with ringing sound, but Ao knew where to find the throbbing heart. Blood gushed, fountained, bathing Arcana in sticky warmth. The tiny yellow eyes of the troll bulged, froze and he staggered forward, wearing Ao's hilt in his side like a brooch. Harl and Arcana held each other up while they watched the spectacle of his fall.

"He's dead," said Harl in a croaking voice accompanied by foam-flecks of blood.

"Yes, but you'd better lie down. You're hurt."

"Only my ribs . . . oooh," he was smiling and moaning at the same moment.

Arcana ran to the fallen stallion. He was lying quietly in a horribly

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awkward position. "If he's dead . . ."

"What a selfish witch it is," said a voice that seemed to come from far down a metallic tunnel. "She cares only for the loss of her own magic, even while I die." The voice rose and fell in volume, but it seemed to be gradually fading.

"You won't die, you vile cloud of sewer gas, not without direct orders from me. You can hold on, can't you?"

The broken body twitched; the blind eyes of the stallion opened. "These snow-ponies are tough, but not indestructible. I can try."

"Good, but we're wasting time. Harl, do you know where the troll lived?"

"I think he'd made a dwelling of sorts on that bluff above us."

"I'm off to find his buried treasure then; it's certain to be near his house."

"Treasure! What about me?" the voice of the daemon would have sounded angrier if it were not so faint.

Arcana did not answer; instead she was prying Ao from the wound in the troll's side, and running toward the bluff that Harl had pointed out.

The troll's hut was made like a bird's nest, out of all sorts of interesting materials: bones, sticks, rocks, skulls, grass, scalps . . . When she poked her head through the door, the smell was an almost palpable curtain. But there was nothing of interest inside. A grassy mound next attracted her attention. Ao gave off a quite different vibration from that of battle; it didn't like being used as a spade. Once the ground had been loosened, Arcana dug with her hands. At times the blood from an open wound in her scalp trickled down into her eyes, but she brushed it aside with a mud-caked hand. A few feet down she began to come upon dirty lumps that were hardly recognizable as the golden urns and silver goblets that they were. A little deeper she unearthed a small ironbound chest filled with coins and jewels, but she cast all this aside and continued digging until she came upon a mound of rotting cloth. She had expected something like this but a coldness grew within her as she began to expose the undecayed body of an ancient troll-hag. She was dead, but not quite, having a magical afterlife that might keep her for centuries, giving off an aura that protected the troll from enemy magic.

When Arcana had exposed enough of the skinny, sere body of the hag, and the brown, prunelike face composed as if peacefully sleeping, she raised the mud-caked sword and hewed the body in half. The hag gave out only a scarcely audible whisper of protest and pain as Arcana hacked at her until there was nothing left but weightless

(cont. on page 105)

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THE INTERVIEW

Here's a Kafkaesque story—squeezed into this issue too late to make the cover—by a new author whose poetry has appeared in a number of literary quarterlies . . .

J. J. RUSS

THEY NEVER TELL you what the important jobs are until you get them. But still, it would have helped if I knew what I was applying for. To get me rattled, they kept me waiting.

"You *are* Mr. Dee, aren't you?" The receptionist mouthed at me over her shoulder and kept her fingertips on the humming keyboard of her typewriter.

"Yes. Dee. I've been waiting—"

Her fingers blurred and a percussive barrage echoed in the shining gray metal walls of the office. Only the outer office.

"How long?" she asked.

"Twenty minutes at least." I knew I had to be patient. They had made it clear the only way to avoid being fired was to win a promotion. Stop rising and you sink. "Do you think the interviewer will see me soon?" I forced my voice into meekness, held down my nasty temper.

There were no other companies.

"Hold it, will you? Wait a sec." Her fingers shot the paper full of black dye. She was brunette, small, but with a nice tight figure. She might have been attractive if her mouth wasn't full of a pink wad of gum. "Almost done with your form," she said. Her lower jaw circled like a cow's. "This last part's *especially* important. The interviewer insists that we get it all down, y'know."

"God damn," I muttered under my breath.

"How d'you spell that, please?"

"What?"

"You know. God damn. Or goddam. Or gah-dayem. For vulgar usage the interviewer demands a phonetic equivalent." Her gum smacked and popped between her words.

I wondered if the job I was trying for included a secretary.

"You can't be serious," I said. "Now look, if the interviewer can't see me I'll just come back another time." I was bluffing, of course, but it might look good on the record. They were recording everything. Maybe if they thought I didn't care about the job they'd believe I was good enough to get it. On the other hand . . .

"G-O-D-space-D-A-M. Okay?"

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Without waiting for my answer, she rapped it out. Then she zipped a yellow form out of the typewriter, plucked out three or four carbons, filed copies in her desk drawer, in an out-box, and pinned one on a bulletin board. She winked at me. "Don't be surprised if you get some telephone calls."

"Why?"

"Girls, silly. We don't have many applicants who *curse*, y'know." She skipped out the office door waving the original copy over her head.

"Back in a sec. Got to have you on microfilm . . ."

It was harrassment and I knew it. They don't give the big jobs to just anybody; you have to stay cool under pressure. I still wondered how they chose me for the list. My old job wasn't really so bad, and if they let me go back to it . . .

No. Going backwards was forbidden.

My watch, the kind with a tuning fork, hummed discretely on my wrist. I'd been waiting almost half an hour. I tried to ignore the curious stares of the rows of smirking office girls, each one behind a gray metal desk. All satellites of the interviewer. I forced down visions of a harem.

Then a blonde in a pink miniskirt walked in front of me, swayed her broad hips ostentatiously, and filed a manila envelope in a low drawer. When she bent forward there was something dark and furry between her legs. I leaned over for a better look.

There was a tap on my shoulder.

"What are *you* looking at, Dee?"

Caught off guard, I had no answer for the interviewer. But he didn't look so ferocious. Fat, middle-aged, with red hair and a gray moustache. The door to his office was open, now.

"Come in, man, come in!" His tone was harsh, and might have meant either irritation or good-fellow cordiality.

I stood up and extended my open palm, but by then the interviewer had turned his back. Following him, I entered a room lined with corrugated soundproofing panels on all surfaces except the floor, which was covered with a plush green carpet. On the desk a tape recorder was sitting in plain view, its reels already turning.

"I am the interviewer, of course." He pointed to the machine and shrugged on shoulder. "I assume you have no objection . . ."

"Oh, no sir."

"Eh, eh, *eh*!" he barked progressively louder and twiddled a knob on the recorder. "Well, Dee, would you say something?"

"What, sir?"

Anything at all." He kept his fingers on the knob and watched a meter lit in pale green. "Have to get the level right or the tape will be a hash. I thought you knew about these things—"

"Oh, I do sir, I do. Testing," I said, "one, two, three."

"Louder, Dee. Scream a little. Just for a peak, you understand."

I screamed a little. The bastard. He wanted me to think there might

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be screaming.

Finally he turned and faced me directly. "Well, now," he said, his moustache tilted in a slight snarl that showed crooked yellow teeth, "why are you late for the interview?"

"*I'm* late?" Quickly, I reviewed in my mind what had happened since I arrived. After announcing that I was to see the interviewer, I—that is, the secretary typed—I told her—or did I? I'd been waiting . . .

"We don't like tardiness. The job requires punctuality. Spirit. Dedication!"

"But sir, I was waiting for almost half an hour. Your secretary said that—"

"Are you coming to see her or me, eh? Why didn't you just come in? You're applying for a job that requires reliability. Also aggressiveness, spunk, flexibility. You do want the job, don't you?" He glanced irritably at his watch and made as if to turn off the recorder.

"Oh yes sir! Definitely." The son-of-a-bitch. He knew I had no choice.

"Well, let's get down to business then. We don't have that much time left. Your dossier . . ." The interviewer plucked a bulging red leather folder from the corner of his desk and opened it while holding the spine at a tilt. Thick papers were stuffed into pockets inside each cover and smaller sheafs of typed forms were clipped in such a manner that they could be leafed through overhand. There were also some loose notes, and as the interviewer leafed through, two of these floated to the carpet. He didn't notice. "Your dossier is not quite complete."

I bit my lip. Which of my deceptions had been found out?

The interviewer frowned. "Between your current job and the one before you've listed no hiatus. Yet our investigations show that you haven't worked for three months."

"Oh, that." I sighed with relief. "Just a vacation. All that time accumulated. I had to take it or else lose it, you know. The company records will show . . ."

"Don't you tell *me* about company records, young man! You should have put it on your application. Everything is important." The interviewer looked disgusted. "If you want the job you have to learn . . ." He dropped his voice to the coaxing whisper of a tutor. "Look. You could, in those three months, have been in a mental institution. You might have been in jail. Perhaps a foreign power was training you in corporate espionage at a hidden place. There might have been another job in the interim, one at which you failed miserably. And, records can be falsified. You see?"

"Yes sir. But still—"

"Never mind!" He pounded his fist on the desk. "If you didn't tell the truth before, why should I believe you now, eh? We'll get to the bottom of it, don't worry about that."

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But I did. Were there other gaps in my history? If they investigated every day of my past, I wasn't sure myself what they would find.

"Don't forget, Dee, the job is very special. In such a position there's no room for evaders, loafers, or even those with poor memories."

I cringed slightly. Whatever the job was, it sounded too much for me. I could never do it. If only the company were less thorough. If only there were another company to work for, besides the enemies . . .

"And there's just one more thing here."

"Yes?"

The interviewer held up a white card flagged with a pink plastic tab. He waited.

"Yes sir?"

"You mean to say you don't know?" His cool eyes went wide with disbelief.

"Know what, sir?"

"If you correct it before I ask, it would be better for you."

I tried to look innocent, and wracked my brain to decide which of my little deceptions had been discovered. I wasn't entirely stupid; to guess would risk adding yet another black mark to my record.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll give you ten more seconds to remember."

But my decision was already made. I concentrated on the office. There was a distant, somehow nasty buzz from the flourescents on the ceiling; in the corner of my eye their blue-white flickered noticeably, but smoothed into a steady glow when I looked straight at them. The office air smelled of carbon paper and typewriter ribbons, and despite the soundproofing from the outer office came the occasional thunder of rolling file drawers. Next to the tape recorder on the desk a bronze eagle-paperweight pointed his hooked beak at the ceiling. On the base was a small plaque inscribed in a strange language:

INTERVTRAN:
TA MADOWTEN SEN BRUMFEN.
FA CADRUM TUMEH FIDDEN.
GLAR. TRABEE. SULT!

The recorder's reels spun, registering my silence. The interviewer rattled my dossier impatiently.

"Very well, since you have nothing to say for yourself . . ." He cleared his throat. "When were you born, eh?"

"I believe it's on the forms, sir." Could I have forgotten to put it in?

"I know that, you fool. But tell me now. When were you born?"

I told him.

"Where?"

I told him that also.

"Have you changed your name in any way during your employment by the company?"

"No, of course not, sir. What do you think I am? Aliases are for criminals. Those with something to hide." I did have things to hide, of course, but not my name. I raised

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my eyes with what I hoped looked like innocence.

"Something to hide. Precisely. And what are you hiding—Dee, or whatever your name is. What?" The interviewer's clenched fists were white; his red hair seemed to bristle with anger.

"Nothing, sir. You know I'm just applying for the job . . ."

"I know nothing. Why is there no record of your reputed birth, eh? Why are you lying about the basic data of your life?" He puffed and sputtered and his gray moustache tangled in the corner of his mouth. "Why do you come here with a false identity, with pretenses? I've had this job for a long time. What do you think I am, a . . . a novice at this business?"

I was flabbergasted. He had challenged the only part of my application I was not expecting to defend. It must have been a mistake; that was it, a stupid error at the bureau of records . .

"But sir, surely my birth certificate—"

"A forgery. We have the most expert opinions." The interviewer shook one finger in my face. "You shouldn't have tried it here, my boy. Not with me. The records of your birth are indubitably fakes and forgeries, every one!"

I was stunned. Either this was a bad joke—or I myself had been fooled more than anybody.

"Sir, I assure you I have no intention of defrauding the organization. Why should I even try?"

"That's for you to answer. Now!"

"I am not lying. I told the truth about my birth."

"How do I know, eh?" The interviewer chortled. "How do you know yourself?"

"Well, my mother always said that—"

"*She's* in it with you, no doubt about it. No hearsay evidence." Irritably, he swept his fingers through his hair. "Now what do you remember of your whereabouts and activities on the date—the reputed date—of your birth?"

"But sir! I don't remember anything, of course."

"Of course? Why *of course?* Are you accustomed to forgetting important events? Do you expect to obtain a responsible position by exhibiting such talents? You were there, weren't you?"

"I think so. But of course I was only a baby. I couldn't have understood what was happening at all, much less remember it." I smiled, confident of my logic.

"Ah, then you didn't know what was happening at the time?"

"No, of course not."

"Ha!" The interviewer pounded his fist against his palm. "How do you *know* you didn't know, eh? First you say you can't remember, and then you tell me what your state of mind was like at the time. Already your story is breaking down." He glowered at my dossier with a grimace of nauseated distaste. "I think it's about time we terminated this . . . interview," he said.

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My stomach pulsed and suddenly expanded, leaving a large space at the center. I would not get the job. I'd find a pink slip in my pay envelope within a few months. Fired from the only legitimate corporation, there'd be no job for me, no money, nothing. Trash, I'd be collected.

"But sir, please. I must have the job. I assure you that I have been perfectly honest with you. If there is any discrepancy—ask me anything, sound me out, test me. You won't find me wanting."

"I've *been* asking you things, young man. You don't seem very willing to cooperate."

"But I'll do anything. I'll even sign a Waiver." I was astounded at my own nerve. I knew all applicants had rights, certain statutory protections. But the rights could be waived under certain circumstances, such as this. I'd be left at the mercy of the interviewer, but still . . .

"Waiver, eh?" The interviewer licked his lips, got to his feet abruptly and turned his back. As he disappeared around a barricade of gray files he waved the back of his hand at me. "Just a minute," he said. "I'll get you a form." I noticed that his ears were red with excitement.

I used the time alone to pull myself together. I mopped my face with a handkerchief, straightened my tie. I heard the interviewer cough occasionally from the dusty recesses of his office, slam file drawers, and then open others while muttering incomprehensibly under his breath. I pulled up my socks. If I really had the nerve to sign the Waiver the interview would test me to my limits.

Suddenly the office door jerked open about a foot and the brunette secretary's face popped inside. She winked at me.

"Howya doing?" I felt as if it were none of her business, especially since it was her fault I came in late. But she smiled sympathetically, and I was too nervous not to talk.

"Not too good, I guess. There's some problem about my birthday. He says it's wrong on the record."

"So what?" She grinned and chewed her gum. "You're here, aren't you? That's what counts. You must have been born, right?"

"Sure. But the time, the place—if they think I'm lying they won't give me the job."

She shook her head. "They hell they won't! Look, they know you got to be lying. Everybody does, y'know. But you've got to lie well enough so that they're almost convinced. For the job you want they could care less if you're honest. But you've gotta *seem* honest or you'll be no good to them."

"But I am honest, goddam it!"

From behind the cabinets came a triumphant "at last!" and a deep slam.

The girl pulled out. "That's what you think," she whispered, closing the door on another wink.

The interviewer paced back behind his desk. He held a piece of

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paper away from his body with one careful hand, as if it might stain his shirt. He sat down, slightly out of breath, patted down his unruly gray moustache, and handed me a bank-style ballpoint pen.

"Read the complete Waiver before you sign," he said in a monotone. It read:

I HEREBY WAIVE AND RELINQUISH ALL RIGHTS TO CLAIM DAMAGES SUFFERED AS A RESULT OF IMPOSED PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSES AND AGREE TO ACCEPT WITHOUT DEMURRANCE ALL EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF SUCH IMPOSED STRESSES WHICH MAY BE IN THE NATURE OF TEST, SPEECH, OR ACTION. I SWEAR THAT THIS WAIVER IS MADE OF MY OWN FREE WILL, WITHOUT ANY DURESS OR COERCION, AND HOLD THE COMPANY HARMLESS . . .

After I signed, the interviewer jumped up and giggled. His face was flushed. "I'll be back in a moment with the tests." This time there was a spring, almost a skip, in his steps as he went back among the cabinets.

I noticed some of the loose sheets of paper that had fallen from my dossier lying under the desk. I didn't dare look in my file itself—but picking something off the floor could be justified, even if I were caught doing it. I snatched up two scraps. The first had a scrawled note in heavy black pencil:

Birthday routine a good bet. If used, chance of signing waiver 87%. Sult!!

Before I had a chance to read the second note the interviewer returned. I stuffed the two pieces of paper into my jacket pocket.

"Very well," he said. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes." I pointedly omitted the *sir*. If he'd tricked me into giving consent . . .

"Very well. There will be three tests. I can tell you what they will be, in general." He held several thin, almost translucent sheets that kept drooping and crackling in his fist. "The first will be a test of intellectual function. The second will test your emotional stability. The third is a complex test of . . . judgmental and other higher-level functions. You have the right at any time—*any* time—to stop the testing procedure, whereupon your name will be removed from the list of applicants."

"No sir, don't do that!" My chest palpitated and the fluorescents buzzed. The bronze eagle on the desk seemed to smirk at me through its sharp beak.

"We have only a few openings in your category, but if you pass the tests your chances will be pretty fair." His skin glistened as he said this. "Not everybody signs the Waiver, you know."

I bet. "Go ahead sir," I told him.

"The first is simple, just ordinary

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vocabulary. You know, of course, what *entasis* means?"

"Of course." Then I was silent, biting my lip. *Enta*—File drawers slammed in the muffled distance and I thought I heard a titter outside the door.

"Well?" The interviewer crackled his papers impatiently.

"I'm sorry. I can't quite—"

"Very well then. *Intussusception?*"

"I beg your pardon." My palms were wet.

"Intussusception. *You* know." He shrugged one shoulder in my direction as if to jog my memory.

"I'm sorry."

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief. With one finger, he brushed down his moustache. "Come now, surely you aren't thinking!" He squinted at his papers and ran two fingers against them vertically. "*Here's* one for you. *Nutant.*"

"Sir Isaac?"

"Not New-*ton*, no! Nutant. N-U-T-A-N-T. Got it?"

"Sorry sir."

"Sorry sir, sorry sir." He mimicked me. "You're not very smart are you?"

I was determined to keep my temper. In the face of his provocation I suppressed my rage and raised my eyebrows innocently. "I don't know about that, sir. The company lists my I.Q. as 138. Are words like this really necessary for the job?"

He didn't answer. "Since you don't know any words, let's try history instead. All right, *mis*ter Dee?"

"Go ahead."

"Very well. In medieval law the term *compurgation* referred . . . to what?"

"I don't see what that has to do with my qualifications."

"Oh you don't? You don't see very much. I'm the interviewer here, and I'll decide what's relevant! Can you answer me or can't you?"

I made a wild guess.

"Hah!" The interviewer slapped his thighs. "Wrong again, Dee, wrong again!"

I fought back by leaning forward and flashing my best disarming smile. "Sir," I lied, "I hate to waste your time. Perhaps if you tell me what my duties will be, I can do better."

"The first test is over, Dee." The interviewer was unimpressed. "We don't have all day to listen to nonsensical answers, now do we?" He shook his head sadly. "Poor fellow. You'd like to stop now, eh?"

It would have been nice. But without a job I'd have nothing. "No. I'll continue, if you don't mind."

He raised his eyebrows and looked uncomfortable. He licked his lips, and I noticed sweat in the hollow between his chin and lower lip.

"Follow me," he said.

He led me around his desk, past staggered gray cliffs of cabinets, and then made a sharp right turn. He moved awkwardly, slamming his side against the corner of a half-

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open sliding drawer while making the turn. "Damn." For some reason, the interviewer was nervous.

We moved into a long, unexpected corridor that had been totally hidden from the desk. It was a blind hallway, dimly lighted at the end. A low black tent with many peaks covered the floor.

"You will sit here." The interviewer pushed a recessed button on the wall, and the black fabric was suddenly lifted by a score of fine wires. It hung like a bat over an equally black and exceedingly well-upholstered reclining chair. The air crackled and reeked of crumpled carbon paper.

I lay on the soft cushions. I allowed him to pull wires from the base of the chair and fasten them to my body. Each wire seemed to have a minute sucking mouth at its end. One stuck to each ankle, one to each wrist, and one to the skin over my heart. Finally he attached a spray of filaments to my scalp. His hand was shaking, and he completed the operations with some difficulty.

"In a moment I'll drop the cloth. Then you'll begin to see, hear and feel things."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You don't do anything—not voluntarily. You'll just react, and the machine will score you according to your responses." He coughed and chuckled. "Maybe you'll do better on these, since they don't require thinking, eh?" He wiped the sweat from under his mouth.

When he pressed the button again the black tent dropped. It was so dark that blinking made no difference.

"Test two," somebody whispered.

At first, silence. My body seemed to be moving in the blackness, moving without my will. First I felt raised to a standing position, then prone, then on one side. Then, without thinking it, the *idea* of a naked woman began to form in my mind. A fingertip with a long nail seemed to be scratching the inside of my thigh.

I remembered I was being tested, and fought the image by visualizing a black plastic transistor radio, sexless, utterly mechanical and electronic. But the radio switched on, and a woman's voice, voluptuous contralto, flowed out:

My middle's firm and tight between round and soft high and low,
the more of my garden path you've seen . . .

Her voice was underscored by drummed bumps and grinds. The radio faded. The woman herself appeared, flushed, nipples erect.

the more of my garden path you've seen the further you want to go my boy
the further you want to go . . .

I sweated. I felt the wires on my scalp and body, stimulating, recording, betraying my emotion to that bastard outside.

Suddenly a bell rang, the woman vanished, the blackness swept

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away. The interviewer grinned over me, his hand on the button.

"You failed that one, too. Don't you have any self-control at all?"

"Some," I said, still trembling.

"Quit?"

"No."

He rubbed his moustache nervously, swept his fingers through his hair. Still rust-colored, it seemed to be fading to the grayness of the hair on his lip. Maybe it was the dim light.

"Look," he said, "you must be insane to go on." His voice was higher-pitched. "If not, you *will* be by the time you're done. Really, Dee, I don't enjoy torturing you." He stifled a nervous giggle. "But it's my job, isn't it? I've got to do what they tell me, don't I?"

I was too busy thinking of unemployment to be sympathetic. All without jobs eventually disappeared, in one month, or six . . . No one knew how. There were rumors that the company's trash collectors came soon after the pink slips. Some claimed to have seen the unemployed rammed head-first into the maws of garbage trucks. Rams compressed them all into a tough, resilient block from which, when dry, were sliced bulletin boards, acoustic tiles, and pads to slip under typewriters.

"Quit?" the interviewer asked again.

"No!"

The black descended. This time I felt no motion. There was only silence and the dark. But gradually I began to feel as if I were standing. There was pressure on the soles of my feet and none on the back of my head and body. I heard a faint sound, like the tap of shoes on a rain-slick sidewalk at night. It came from behind me.

I turned my head, but whatever I did the sound remained behind. The noise came closer. Still, I could see nothing. I tried to recall the chair I was sitting on, the dusty file cabinets. I tried to remember it was all imaginary. But I couldn't. I only knew that somebody was coming up behind me in the dark and I couldn't do anything about it.

Sweat. Sweat and shaking. I'd be killed. The Waiver—did it say anything about physical injury?

The tapping stopped, followed by small scuffing noises just behind me. Then there was silence, except for a faint whistle, like air moving through hairy nostrils. In . . . out . . . I was ready to scream when something swept in front of my eyes.

It moved fast, but I saw a flash of the bulging forearm, matted springs of black hair. Then it was around my neck, squeezing. I couldn't breath. There was a screech like a train rubbing rails in a tight corner. The screech was me.

"Well, had enough?" The bat cloth was back near the ceiling. "You failed that one too, you know. No control in either sexual or aggressive situations. Not stable, not stable at all!"

"Is it over?" I asked.

"Why don't you give up. *Please*." Shaken as I was, I couldn't help

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noticing that the interviewer's fingers were quivering with a fine tremor. "You've failed *every*thing so far. Who knows what may happen if you go on? I don't want to be responsible! Look, Dee, maybe if you stop now a deal can be made . . . maybe I can forget to record the scores, not on purpose of course. The taping could be, ah . . . lost. Without all this on your record you can apply again when you're ready."

"Go through this again? Are you crazy?" His pleading somehow made me angry. "Do these things have to stay on?" I shook myself in the network of wires.

"Oh no, of course not." He plucked them off, leaving small red rings on my skin. He spoke very softly and rapidly near my ear, panting between words:

"Look, Dee, this is a bad time to apply . . . few openings. They have to wait for somebody to resign or . . . be retired." He gulped. "I'll tell you a secret. When there are more jobs they make the questions easier, yes, easier." He patted me on the back. "I didn't have to tell you that, but I did. How about it?" The red in his hair seemed almost extinguished. "Okay?"

I couldn't afford to trust him. The company . . . trash collectors . . .

"No," I said.

His face went pale. He led me back down the corridor, around the corner, scarcely lifting his feet. The tape recorder was still turning on the desk, its reels reflecting glints of light against the bronze eagle.

"I have to get something," the interviewer said, and walked around me to a narrow file cabinet near the door. "Sit down, Dee. Take it easy. You've earned a rest, yes you have." I heard him breathing rapidly behind me.

I sat numb, nearly hypnotized by my exhaustion and the turning reels. My shirt felt cool and damp under my armpits. I'd lost the job, of course. I wondered how the company would utilize my remains.

Something swept in front of my eyes.

"Hey—"

My voice was cut off by the interviewer's forearm against my neck. I pulled at it with both hands, but it didn't budge. Dizzy, I tried to reach behind me. The arm tightened.

"I *told* you it was a bad time to apply!" He grunted with the effort of squeezing.

I tried to stand, but my legs were too weak. It began to get dark again. I imagined the bat cloth dropping on me again, covering everything. This time I could sleep . . . I groped on the desk in front of me.

And then I was swinging the bronze eagle up and back over my head. It felt cool and very heavy. There was the sound of something splitting.

I could breathe.

The beak of the eagle was sunk at least two inches between the interviewer's eyes. There wasn't much blood, but all I could think about was blotting the few drops that

(cont. on page 118)

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BARRY N. MALZBERG

Barry Malzberg (whose "Triptych" appeared here last issue) returns with a longer story, this one about two somewhat earnest young men and what they do and find and become in the—

NETWORK

Illustrated by JOE STATON

I

JIGGER AND ME, we go into Network.

Things in the Institute are pleasant and dull, dull and pleasant; there are limits to the life offered which every now and then must be tested. At the gate a guard, young one with grief-stricken eyes spots and stops us which is unusual, check-points on in-action being laughable in Network. The philosophy is that if you want to go you deserve what you get but every time you take this sure they pull a stop, proving that the Institute is not complete conditioning for life. Just almost.

"You'd better forget it," the guard says. He holds a gun but nevertheless looks ineffective. "Down Southway they're — bulldozing."

"No problem," Jigger says. He is nervous and drawn fine by the drive and, despite my warnings, will not go easy with the guard. Jigger is young yet, younger than me: eighteen but with gifts. "We'll lay off Southway. We're not heading that way."

"Westerly's not too good either," the guard says. I realize, looking at him, that he is terrified. Holding check-point on Network is no good job which is why the dregs who they can get for it cannot take pressure. (Somewhere there is an irony I will ignore.) "Northing the same."

"Screw Westerly, Southway, Northing," Jigger says, "we are going *in*. We are from the Institute."

The guard shrugs. I see his fear shift, turn into something which might be detachment. (Maybe not.) The Institute does not have many friends in or on Network's edges. "Institute, huh?" he says. "Institute boys. Well now, I don't give a damn. Go on in, it's your life. There's no blockade, just a warning."

"Good," says Jigger. He puts the car in gear and hits out flat, the

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Barrier just opening as we ease through. "Southway, Westerly, Northing, screw them." We roll. He puts another tab in his mouth. "Head to Easto?" he says, leaning out the window to cast some spit, "Or just go center and see what drags?"

"Don't care," I say. I touch my own gun in an inside pocket, wondering what would have happened if the guard had balked us. They have no right to stop entry of course and the Institute pulls a lot of weight . . . still, would I have shot him?

Don't know. He would have opened up like a greenhouse filled with decayed flowers, falling and bleeding in petals down the uniform. Good thoughts for a trip into Network. I feel the jolt of connection then happiness as the feelings spread. Like flowers. I reach out a hand to take a tab from Jigger.

"Pot luck," I say and he laughs, pulls the car down a fast ramp and *wham!* we are in Northing.

II

EASTO, WESTERLY, SOUTHWAY. NORTHING. Northing is the most dangerous due to the natural advantages of terrain. The river lies to one side, the Bay to the other, in the midst, still undeveloped, strips of park in which the bands scoot. A

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part of Northing that used to be the big projects is supposed to be protected by citizen patrol but I do not believe in the vigilantes, it is just a rumor, I think, to suck the tourists in. Nevertheless, Northing is far easier than Westerly and Easto which are formally at war and torn up by gases often enough. Southway is oddly enough (although they are bulldozing now) the part without a distinct smell and rep of its own. Perhaps this is the reason for the riots, Southway's bands out to make their own name.

Northing is tough enough for two from the Institute on only their third trip into Network. (And the first hardly counts; we came in with supervisors and armor for a reconaissance under patrol, were in and out in daylight-quick. The second was really the first. The third the second.)

"Look," Jigger says, the car rolling. We are moving through a dense, gutted area: the high smell of gases in the air, darkness from all but headlights. It looks empty but through his point I can see that it is not. Forms scuttle, whisk of shape, the sound of crackling. The bands are on the move. Or maybe it is only freelancers, having a look at a strange car.

"Let's take them," Jigger says. His hands embrace the wheel, we roll to quiet, his rasp the only sound. "They're coming now," he says, his forehead against the windshield. "I can sense."

"Maybe we should move out," I say. For the first time, the guard not counting, I feel Network-fear. It is one thing at the Institute to plan the trip and another to be parked on a street in Northing, waiting for the bands. I am not ashamed of this fear although I know Jigger does not share it. (This is why I wanted to go with him.) "We can make a reconaissance."

"Crap," he says, working another tab, offering me one. "No delay. This is what we wanted, right?" We chew, ingest, meditate, consider, all in a trice while sounds grow. "Let's get the bastards," he says.

Forms around the car. Two, possibly three: a man and a girl, something indeterminate, lurking in the background. Mop-up, then. I see their faces as they close and they are the faces of Network: ravaged, implacable. There are actually people living here. This is the thing which even the Institute can hardly make us accept. *People* live here.

Jigger rolls down the window and they circle to that side, the man leading. Now I can see that the third is not hiding mop-up but is merely the smallest and slowest of the three, possibly a child. Jigger gives a wink and then leans out the window, waiting.

"Please," the man says to him. "You're from outside."

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"Yes," Jigger says, "we are from outside. You?"

"Please," the man says again. Now, close, his face is overtaken by pain. That is the way it is in Network. "Get us out of here."

"You've got to help," the woman says. "We've been waiting, waiting for someone to come. Please take us." She is not pretty although I could give her a throb or two depending upon mood. She backs from Jigger's side, comes toward mine and I remember from the Institute the trick of encirclement which the bands play, grasp my own gun. Then I roll down the window for confrontation. "We can go in the trunk," she says. "Just past the border and then leave."

"Let you in the car?"

"You came to see Network," the man says. "Now and then tourists come in. Take us out with you. We can tell you many things. We'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Now you must," the woman says. The thing that is a child moves up behind and hidden now, gestures. Instantly I am keyed. I take out the gun and holding it firmly show it to the woman.

"Get away," I say. "Get away now."

Jigger has his own gun and the man on his side retreats. No," he says, "this is impossible. "I'm dreaming this."

"Nothing's impossible," says Jigger. He giggles. "This is Network and anything goes." He pulls the trigger and the man falls away, moaning. There is a wet sound and the moans stop as the woman tries to dive the window.

"Are you crazy?" she says and I shoot her. She falls away in the same way that the man did although not as quickly and when she is out of the line of sight the child is there whimpering, reaching. "Daddy," it says, "daddy".

Clean them out. I shoot the child, Jigger laughs and shoots the child, then we point our guns at the ground and empty them into whatever is below. Spattering of bullets. We roll up the windows, put the guns away and look at one another. My first Kill. Jigger's too, I am sure.

"Bastards," he says, using a sleeve on the bloody windshield but the blood is outside.

"Let's go."

"Where? I don't want to suck them out anymore."

"Let's see the riots in Southway."

"Southway?" Jigger says. His eyes glitter. "But what if we can't handle it?"

"We can handle it," I say. I am filled with the glow of Institutional training as well as that of my first Kill. "See, we can handle anything."

"Not in Network," Jigger says but he starts the car anyway and moves it again, saying no more. Al-

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though the tabs have kept him down, limited display, I can tell that he is proud and I am proud as well because it is no small accomplishment taking a Kill in Northing.

"Anywhere," I say, "we can handle it anywhere," and we pick up the highway again, almost no traffic because of the warnings and hit dead toward the sea, toward Southing.

Looking into the river I think of the three from Network we have killed and of how thus we have saved them, this small purification of the Network, the administration of grace.

III

THROUGH WESTERLY and out the other side, the highway grey like a dream, unrolling before us. We do not talk now, being occupied with memory, with the sense of the Kill. At the Institute we were told that the first Kill would change our lives, that one could not simply go into Network without risking a Kill and the Network was not to be taken casually for this reason . . . but I did not believe them. The Institute gave us the history of the Network: policies, procedures, attitudes, *modus oprandi*, but left out the way it felt. *Ethos* is the word for this I believe. They missed the *ethos* of Network.

Network is over three hundred years old but only assumed its present cast in the early 1900's. Things accelerate. Within a century it had become closed by fiat to all but its residents (who no longer had exit) and approved travelers. Such as students of the Institute. Such as Jigger and I . . . and at this phase of recollection I squeal in panic because the road has fallen away and we skitter down a hundred feet of stone into the outskirts of Southway, the car out of control, Jigger tabs or no screaming with fright as he works on the wheel and finally we plunge into an abutment and come to rest, the car ruined, stinking in a puddle of its own residue. Jigger tries hopelessly to restart and then sighs, releases the wheel.

"Finished," he says. "We're finished."

"Don't panic." I will myself toward control and by feeling various parts of the body learn that I am not injured. "That does no good."

"How are we going to get out of here?"

"Somehow," I say. Jigger is younger, merely a sophomore, a child despite all of his attitudes and manipulations and this forces me toward calm. "All we have to do is get to checkpoint. We have our Institute identification and once we get there we'll be protected."

"How are we going to get there?

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We're ten miles down."

"Ten miles from Northing checkpoint . . . there are three others. I think," I say, geography courses coming back, "that Westerly checkpoint is only a little way from here. It's on the tip of Southway."

"We'll never make it," Jigger says, "we'll never make it." He kicks, groans, pushes against his door until it oozes open and then stumbles to the pavement.

I push against my own door, it yields and I come out slowly, joining him on the pavement before the hood. Tendrils of pain work through legs, belly, but I do not feel seriously injured. "Yes we will," I say. "We're on the docks and all we have to do is walk. Walk it through."

I examine the terrain for the first time. Dead animals, a human corpse or two, the outlines of what were automobiles are scattered around the pillars but it is quiet. Too far north apparently for the riots; west enough to be out of Westerly. "They must have wrecked the highway," I say, "sooner or later that would have to happen. We'll report it and the area will probably be sealed off."

"They wrecked the highway to trap us!" Jigger whines. His nervousness and fear are now becoming disgusting although I remind myself yet again that he is only eighteen. "They'll pick us off like rats if we move. They're *watching*." He fumbles, takes out his gun. "But I'll take you with me!" he screams.

"Shut up," I say. I hit him on the shoulder in a special way, not sufficient to paralyze but enough to make him whimper and he stops flailing.

"Help me," he says then in a voice much like what we heard in Northing. "Please help me."

"I will," I say although the impulse is to abandon Jigger where we stand, on the rim of Southway, and let him deal for himself. It is an impulse easily understood, later to be regretted . . . since I would have to explain my behavior at the Institute and it would be proven that Network had brutalized me. I take his shoulder, the uninjured one. "Come on," I say, "and we'll stick to the waterline."

Past the decaying matter on the river, past the hulks of rotting ships we pick our way. Jigger and I, through the odors, striving for the Westerly checkpoint. All of this has happened so quickly that for the moment I do not think of the riots or at least the possibility of riots which the young guard mentioned and they come upon us so quickly then, so silently that there is not even time for panic.

IV

BACKED AGAINST the fence that

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holds off the river Jigger and I are stalked by a band from Westerly. I remember now from the courses that the Westerly bands are the most dangerous of all because their terrain makes it necessary for them to navigate water as well and their water knowledge has enabled them to voyage out of their territory as other bands cannot; they can strike at Northing, circle around and into Easto . . . oh God, there are ten or twelve of them stalking us. These are not ravaged like the Northing tenants but are our age or maybe a little younger.

"Stop!" the one in front who is the leader calls to us. "We want to talk."

"Oh God," Jigger says, "help me." He tries to reach inside for his gun but it is with his injured arm and he stops in motion, gasping.

"You fool," I whisper, "we emptied them, remember?"

"We were going to refill them. Oh my God, we were going to refill, why didn't we, I can't stand this anymore, I'm so afraid, run, please help me run—"

Disgusting . . . but it is a communicable terror as well and I know that I will not be able to deal with it. "Shut up you," I say and strike him in the mouth. The leader who has watched this laughs and then reaches in a pocket to show his own gun.

"That's enough," he says, "suburban scum. Stay in place!" His breaks on the shout indicating that he may be younger than I have judged him. Jigger roots in place, breath pouring and cautiously I put my hands at sides, casting a glance back at the river. It is impossible and yet I cannot dodge the hope that the Institute has kept watch over us and a full patrol is waiting in rescue after we have learned our lesson. Surely, the Institute could not abandon us now, not in terms of the cost of our training, the thorough knowledge we have obtained of Network as the result of our unauthorized visit.

"Please," Jigger says, "please don't hurt me"; I hit him again, this time so hard that he falls groaning into the mud. He lies there quietly and, I hope, unconscious. The leader looks up and winks.

"What do you want?" he says. "Why are you here?"

"We're on the way out," I say, "we're looking for the Westerly checkpoint."

"That information is bullshit. We blew out Westerly checkpoint years ago. What are your sources, you suburban scum?"

"No," I say, "you don't understand. We aren't sightseers. We came to learn. We—"

"Tourists," the leader says. "You come for thrills, see Network, get a little jolt but you always get more than you hype, right? This is *our* Southway, suburbs, and no sightseers get out the same way."

"Please." I moan and stumble over Jigger, losing my balance and

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falling into the mud, feeling the repellent ooze come over my wrists and ankles as the band closes in. "You're wrong. We came to help you, to learn. To learn about the Network. We're from the Institute."

"What Institute?" someone cries, "what are you talking about?" and then others pick this up and some five or ten or twenty are shouting *what Institute?* as Jigger tries to crawl and I try to recover my balance in the mud but I cannot negotiate the grounds of Westerly and flop helplessly.

"Get them," the leader says, knocking off the cries, "get them good. Institute! We'll institute something, won't we?"

"The Institute," I shout, trying to get the words out but they come over me like the gases of Network themselves and I must hawk and gasp to speak . . . but the words which come then are a whisper and so no one except Jigger (who already knows) can hear, "the Institute for Urban Control."

And so we fall into Southway.

—BARRY N. MALZBERG

She-Bear (cont. from page 86)

chunks like lengths of dried cornstalk. Nearly exhausted at the bottom of the gravelike hole, Arcana raised her hands and voice in the releasing spell. She felt and heard the daemon pass her like a cold, clean, rushing wind.

ARCANA AWOKE out of a fear-haunted sleep expecting to see fresh dirt and fragments of dry flesh, but instead she was inside one of the houses, lying on a pallet of fresh pine boughs.

Harl squatted before her with an earthenware bowl of steaming liquid in his outstretched hands. She sipped it and sat up, coughing. "Ugh, what is that stuff?"

"An old family remedy. It always brings about a swift cure."

"It must have worked for you as well."

"Some bones were bent but none broken, I hope," he said, touching his ribs gently.

There was an embarrassed silence between them.

"I wonder . . ." said Harl.

"What do you wonder?"

He leaned over and pushed the disheveled hair back from her forehead. "I wonder what will be the outcome of our next battle." He dropped to the pallet beside her and gave out a cry of surprise and pain.

"Oh," said Arcana discovering the sword still convulsively clasped in her hand. The jewel-eyes of the dragon blinked up at them, then she tossed it aside, laughing, and it clattered into a dark corner of the room, cobwebbed and forgotten.

—JANET FOX

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HEARTBURN IN HEAVEN

In the nearly two years since the publication of her first story here ("Timmy Was Eight," February, 1972), Miss Doenim tells us she has "graduated high school in the full flush of my first sale, hung around a lot of the places I thought Aspiring Young Writers should hang around, started college, quit college, and done a lot more reading, most of which just made me more aware of my failings as an Aspiring Young Writer." Among those authors she is now reading with the greatest interest is Harlan Ellison, to whom "I affectionately dedicate my story" . . .

SUSAN DOENIM

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

MY NAME is N. That is all that I can remember. It is obviously necessary to someone's scheme that I can recall neither my name nor my previous identity. I am not horrified; I am mildly curious about the hidden masters' designs, but I'm not going to crack my head finding out. They brought me here, let them take care of me. They do let me sleep late.

I HAD THE very great pleasure of waking up this morning and realizing that I wasn't guilty any longer. The world goes on, and our common participation in the responsibility for events and atrocities and errors continues, but not for me. Somehow I knew that I had been absolved, that I, alone, had been cleansed. For no particular reason, to no special purpose, through no singular inner goodness of my own. I awoke as Noah, blessed among men, but as though no others existed to tempt me or to remind me of past transgressions. I am whole and at peace, though that is not to say at rest. No, my mind is running at a faster pace than ever I thought healthy.

Perhaps this strangely disquieting peace is necessary to my accepting the outre and rather tritely alien environment in which I find myself today. I cannot help but wonder if men are *supposed* to feel this well-adjusted, if it is somehow a symptom of graver and blacker disorders than those I nourished

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when I worried. I don't know who will hear my complaints, but evidently someone believes this place to be unsettling, bizarre, and intimidating. Nothing could be farther from the truth, as far as I am concerned. I am bored by the expense and trouble that has been thrown into my Hell.

I RAISED MYSELF painfully from the shiny metal floor. I worked strenuously, pulling the resisting weight of my body up, first to rest on naked, bruised elbows, then bending my cramped legs so that I knelt among my mirror images, my mind strangely silent. I breathed deeply, still on my knees, swinging my arms to restore circulation, letting my head hang tiredly forward, my temples aching enough to stifle any sort of prayer my posture might have suggested. In a few seconds I put one hand on my knee, held my other arm out stiffly for balance, and rose, hurting and gasping and not thinking, to stand with fingertips almost touching the polished steel wall with the white plastic plaque bolted to it.

The thoughts were there in potential only. I did not make any effort to kill them as they settled, seedlike, in the empty, once-fertile area of my mind. I made a single choice, shortly after awakening that first time in the metal tunnel. I could face those questions immediately, to no end other than

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panic, or I could postpone them until after a physical inventory of my body and surroundings; I chose the latter course, hoping to find the answers set out for me by some unknown and unlikely benevolence.

The inventory was completed too quickly to provide any answers of value. I was here, I was in good physical condition, and the place was a polished steel corridor—walls, ceiling, floor, all polished steel. I looked at myself reflected in the walls' slightly greasy sheen. I was naked and I needed a shave. The questions started to tumble and shake their way down toward consciousness: I raised my hands before me, carefully bringing them up from invisibility to eye level at the same speed so they arrived in front of my face at precisely the same time. Without stopping, my fingers pushed away, toward the wall of mirrored steel; I found that to touch it I had to take two steps closer. My fingers touched the wall, the metal cold against the ten tips, my palms held away, arched. I pressed hard, tried to force the steel back, hurting my arms with the pressure. I slid my hands down the wall, so hard that I would have ripped the skin and left blood on brick or grained wood. But there were only parallel smudges, records of two snail squads moving down the clean wall and away from each other, farther and farther apart as they traveled down, until I fell, hugging my knees and crying the questions on the bright metal floor.

I THINK ABOUT HELL. Am I in Hell, Nibelungen-forged steel panels lining the mazy ways, troll-turned Phillips screws holding the awful bright metal to the walls? I think about school, about elementary school years ago, miles ago. I can't of course recall the name of the school, or where or when it was, or the name of anyone I knew. I just picture corridors, dark, unlike these aggressively lit tunnels, leading through the basement to lavatories and gyms to my class. I still dream of those days, pre-pubic wonder mornings with spelling books and condors in Peru. Has some facile television hack taken those dreams to build me my own solitary prison of an afterlife?

I remember how everyone used to go on about natural things. Natural things were very popular there for a while: natural foods, natural environment, natural functions. Cities were evil and machines were debilitating. Progress was sinful, new products, additives, refinements, improvements, short-cuts, — miniaturizations, substitutes were all unnatural. Ah, trees and blue skies and tuning in to the universe and whole wheat bread. What's wrong with straight lines, I used to say? What's wrong with doing things more efficiently, safely, cheaply, ambitiously? What's

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wrong with saving time? What's wrong with being cooled, heated, transported, enriched vitaminally, entertained? I just could not understand the rage for the simple in my contemporaries. I enjoyed our culture, our technology, our *things*.

Of course, I did my share of righteous deploring. But I could see that the answer wasn't in running off to the murmuring pines and the hemlocks; the bugs bit, and the rocks ended up in the small of your back in the middle of the night, and you learned quickly how unself-sufficient you were so that you had to leave and go back to get toilet paper and matches and another jar of Vaseline.

How hard the floors are.

I AM ONE with the Universe and my fellow man and God is me but my stomach hurts.

It's easy to see that there isn't any need for clocks, as there isn't any reason for a tape deck in a refrigerator. I've gone to sleep several times since I've been here, so call it maybe a week. The first few days were terrifying, but I'm getting the hang of it. There are rules that slowly, slowly make themselves evident. I did not eat for two days because it took me that long to understand my job. But life is simple, and I am not yet willing to explore beyond my basic needs. I am appalled at how quickly one adapts. It is an insult to the human condition.

I learn things by accident, not so much by trial and error as by just crudely stumbling over the laws of this cosmos whenever they decide to reveal themselves. The food is always in the same place, on the floor of the corridors where I first became conscious. It looks exactly like every stretch of tunnel that I've seen except for the white plaque. The sign is bolted to the metal a little above my eye level and says: "Above this point was the site of the J. C. Penney Building, New York City." I do not understand the past tense. But if I go through that part of the tunnel just after I wake up in the morning there is food waiting for me.

I was not fed until I started working. When I arrived, there were two objects next to me on the clean steel floor: a box of Scrubbi pads and a can of Jennings' Metal Polish. I ignored them for two days; but then, out of boredom or curiosity I don't know, I started polishing my length of tunnel, from the intersection with the Hanna tunnel (named for the plaque indicating the former site of the Hanna building, Cleveland, Ohio) to the intersection with the Peabody Museum tunnel (New Haven, Connecticut). This is about seventy yards of corridor, floor, walls, and ceiling. I have no idea what the plaques mean. Are they a joke? Perhaps I am at the center of the

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earth, where all these places are directly above me, equally distant on the stale-bread crust of this, our world. I entertain myself with fantasies.

I AM ENCOURAGED to continue these notes by the regulation of my food, which seems to depend on my trading the pages for the day's rations. The first small entry was written out of pure frustration, in pink polish on one of the smudgeless panels along my corridor. There was no food that day, and I guessed that it was because of my Message In Soap. I cleaned it off, polishing the stainless steel to its accustomed brightness. The next day, with my food, was a single page of paper and a pen. That day I did a somewhat longer though no less hysterical paragraph, I don't recall it exactly. No food again. No paper the next day, either. I figured that the nameless they were dissatisfied. Did they want to read what I had written the day before? I left the page with my empty food dish. It disappeared that night. The following morning I got a new sheet of paper with my food; now every day I leave the day's wit and wisdom with my dish, and every morning I get a clean sheet of paper.

Where does my food come from? How does it get into the corridor? Why are they interested in what I write? Why am I here?

I don't even care.

I JUST RAN INTO F, the only other person I've met here. It's remarkable how such an event can so thoroughly change all the working hypotheses I've made. No, this isn't my private torture. No, I'm not dreaming or insane. No, there isn't any simple, accessible rationale for all of this. At least, then, F is just as dense as I, which gives me a perverse sort of comfort.

On the other hand, doing the comparing-notes routine, my few observations have been corroborated. Little satisfaction there. F told me that it took him even longer to learn the way the food worked. He, too, has staked out a section of tunnel (beneath the former site of the Rose Bowl, Pasadena, California. It is along my corridor, about a day's walk from the Peabody intersection.). He doesn't keep any sort of notes; all he does is polish the walls, day after day after day without a break. He isn't the least bit curious about where we are. He warns me that I'll be very hungry when I return to my home tunnel; does that mean that F anticipated my journey with his own, does he speak from experience, or fear? Why should he care?

I PUT YESTERDAY'S sheet of notes with F's empty dish, at his food place. Nothing, no food or paper.

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My sightseeing will be cut short, I can tell. I'm hungry.

F told me about the others. I'm not surprised; seeing him implied a whole community down here. (I trust the plaques enough to assume that we are, in fact, *down*.) There are perhaps three dozen of us, each attached in an umbilical sense to his own particular length of corridor. No one knows how any of the others got here; every so often a new member of the community will be discovered, as I was yesterday by F. The new person may or may not have figured out the ground rules, and, if not, is immediately instructed in polishing, polishing. There is little social activity, chiefly because the work takes up so much time. If one misses one's food, there is *no* other way to eat short of theft.

Naturally enough, every person seems to have his own theory about the true situation and how we came to be here. I'm the only one with paper and any desire to put words on it. *Ergo*, F "suggested" that it would be nice if I were to sort out the theories and codify them and arrange them into a mythic structure. He said that we had little else to hold us together down here. I have the opportunity to single-handedly begin a new culture. I've known F for two days and already he's forcing me into a slot in their "society". Coincidentally the same slot the mysterious Masters Of The Enigma have chosen for me. I think F is a ringer.

I can think of little I would rather do less than codify their dumb-ass dreams.

I TURNED INTO the Peabody tunnel today and followed it until I reached the Flagstaff intersection, which I entered and followed until I met S. S is a woman. I hesitate to admit that I had forgotten about women. Sex, elementary passions, petty jealousies, rages of unrequited love: a whole new vista of human entanglements. How much of life have I forgotten, that we are fated to rediscover here?

S does no polishing. *Vide:*

What do I say to her, the second, and only the second, person that I have ever known (my memory tells me)? "Why hello there!" "Hi, my name is N. What's yours?" "Do you come here often?"

The whole scene is taken right out of my hands. "Would you like to make love to me?" she said. We're both standing there naked, see, in this stainless steel rathole, and I haven't even had the first twinge of a sexual urge. I had forgotten about it.

"Now?" I said. My reporting here may not be the most veritable of my records, but it's the best that I can do. I was still a little off-balance.

"Sure," she said. I thought of something silly, I think, on the order of "My place or yours?" but I

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said nothing for a moment.

"All right," I said.

"You have to give me half of your food for today."

Aha! Commerce! There is hope for us down here after all. Whole new horizons of industrial revolutions, labor organizers, interlocking boards, price-fixing, limited only by the lack of raw materials: food, Scrubbi pads, polish, my sheet of paper. What new ingenious combinations await discovery, to make the fortune of the lucky and adventurous speculator?

"Don't have any with me," I said, rather sadly.

"Oh," she said.

We looked at each other. "You, uh, you live here?" I asked.

"No. I live over in the News branch. I don't have to stay around, though, as long as I can drum up some business."

"Do you think this is Hell?"

"No," she said.

"That's very interesting. Why not?" I unfolded my paper to record her reasons. She kicked me.

"It's not bad enough," she said, while I stared in surprise. "If this were Hell it'd be as bad as it could be. I can think of lots worse."

"What do you think, then?" I asked.

"I think we're somewhere else. Before Heaven, where we can work off the badness and just be good."

Between Heaven and Hell. I know there's a word for it but I can't think of it. God's cloakroom to paradise. Check your foibles at the door.

"Is that what you're doing?" I asked. "Working off badnesses?"

"Not yet. I still have time, I think."

I left her and headed back home to think about the significance of all we discussed. But after all is said and done I still have to polish my walls to get fed. There's no room for philosophies when you're chained to your empty stomach. If ever we're born from this shiny, shiny womb we'll have huge navels where our faces used to be.

I TALKED WITH F. He doesn't think much of S. Says she doesn't move much or anything, and that there's a better deal over in the Gastalia tunnel (wherever that is), some woman named W. What a strange name. Double you. Unwieldy. Driven her to prostitution.

F says there are just about as many women as men, no children. I had forgotten about children. Children! What are we going to do if the women get pregnant? Family groups, tribes, leadership, rival factions, border disputes, violence in the name of providing for the weaker members. Sometimes the old world tries to peek through the cold metal walls.

F tells me now that as long as he's been here no woman has gotten pregnant. He chuckled. I

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shudered.

F tried to tell me his theory of our arrival here, but my repeated assurances that I wouldn't set it down in my notes finally convinced him that he was wasting his time, and he went back to his polishing. He is getting hard to take. He wants so badly to be respected as the Acting Supervisor or whatever; I really ought not to care, the job of boss being so meaningless here (who needs supervising?), but for some reason I resent him. Does he want to be immortalized in my notes, or does he want to be certain that I write about *something* for the edification and reading pleasure of his/our Supreme Overlords. It's difficult to believe that he really thinks that we all come from beads of condensed moisture on the steel walls, collected in small pools on the steel floor. That's a bit much.

And those white lab-coated readers of these words (I *will not* address you directly), walking about clipboarded on the other side of this infantile Skinner box. What the hell do they think they're proving? That if a group of people are starved they'll do menial tasks to get food? Is that it? Do they want us to work up show-stopping song and dance numbers, too? Just tell us. Anything at all. Can we go home now?

I'll be damned if I bust my ass to find out the inside story. If they slip and let me figure it out, fine. But I won't give them the satisfaction of grand schemes and clever ploys. And neither will I bend my knee, as F and S have done, judging from their bland attitudes. I don't know how long they have been here, but I can't see myself ever forgetting that this is *not* the old world, however much I may have been compelled to forget the old world itself. I will not succumb, and I will not fight. I will take my food and wait; they can't do this forever, and I will not be made a fool of.

Thinking about S. 'Tis pity she's a whore.

A quotation.

Who? I don't have any names. A connection . . . the old world. They haven't got me yet! What puny weapons . . .

TOOK HALF MY FOOD to S and *made love* to her. She thanked me and told me to call again. It wasn't very good. I don't remember if I ever *made love* to anyone in the old world. We talked for a while afterward. I asked her if I could expect to be punished for, uh, patronizing her. She said she didn't think so. I said good. Then I came home. I won't do that again.

How can I get food? Offer to polish someone else's tunnel? It isn't worth it. Sell a poem?

Here we are
down here and all
and all we have
are walls

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and halls
and balls of used-up Scrubbi pads
why don't we try making liquor
out of the Metal Polish
we could all
get together and have
a blast.

I told F that he could buy that poem for half his food and he told me to go to Hell. He must agree with S that this is somewhere else entirely.

I'm tired of all this nonsense. I'm tired of F and his ridiculously officious manner. I'm tired of the melodrama of this situation. I'm tired of having to document my boredom. There are few thoughts that I can have other than "What's going on?" and even that seems curiously irrelevant.

Life is weirdly funny. A universal truth. Enough to spring me from this sterile paneled prison? We shall see.

THE WISE THING to do is stay put and polish. There is nothing to be accomplished by wandering these silvered halls; the plaques are there to drive us complacent with wondering and hope, the other people are as ignorant as I and less willing to talk. It took me a while to realize that my life here concerns me very little, in point of actual fact. I trust that the Board of Directors does, indeed, have some grand overall plan, that my being here is in some way necessary to its success, that the situation is not the product of capriciousness or (unthinkable!) accident. So thus is reborn faith. With faith travels, in even raggeder clothing, hope: hope of deliverance. Heaven intrudes its theologically tattered visage. We don't even know what we'd be delivered from. Certainly not our travails. We have only one—polishing—and fair honest labor is beneficial to the soul, eh? Then do we deserve or even need deliverance? Is this Heaven already? The only possible way to understand our situation would be to remember the old world. Heaven and Hell have become relative quantities, good and evil removed once and always from the ranks of the absolute.

Well, if this were Heaven I wouldn't have heartburn.

S thinks that new people are formed from all the leftover food. I've never seen any leftover food.

Polishing. Eating. Sleeping. Polishing. There's nothing to write about. All I can do is wait.

I'VE BEEN HERE at least one hundred and twenty days. I've met everyone else. They all polish, shine up those clean, clean walls, scrub off yesterday's shine, erase yesterday's scuff marks. (Our naked heels collect polish, as there is no dust, and sometimes, almost invisibly, smear it along our own or someone else's tunnel. For this we

(cont. on page 130)

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Editorial (cont. from page 4)
into one-third of a novel (the serial) and five shorter stories and in AMAZING it was divided into one-half of a novel (the serial) and three (not two) shorter stories, the actual wordage was the same. When I assemble an issue of either magazine, I pick the stories first, and the total wordage of those stories is always about the same (allowing for differing methods of wordage estimation, as used by various authors—a tolerance of plus-or-minus a few hundred words in any case).

I cannot speak for the wordage of fiction in *If*, but I suspect that inasmuch as that magazine has more pages (and costs correspondingly more) it also publishes somewhat more fiction. The rub is that in all three magazines the fiction runs from short stories to serials—and in an issue of AMAZING or FANTASTIC the total wordage taken up by an installment of a serial is usually around 50% or more of the total fiction in that issue. However, both *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and the *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* tend to run many more short stories and rarely a serial or novella.

There are sound reasons for this disparity, both economic and esthetic.

Ellery Queen (Dannay & Lee) once remarked that the short story is the ideal form for the mystery. This is true in fact only when considering a relatively narrow range of mystery stories—the puzzle stories. But the intellectual puzzle—whodunnit—is a mainstay in mystery fiction, especially in the mystery magazines, and for good reason. Anyone who has suffered through a traditional mystery novel is aware that to the extent that the puzzle dominates the story, the bulk of the novel is padding: the puzzle is usually stated in the first chapter and resolved in the last. The chapters inbetween serve only to bulk out the book to novel length.

This is not true of most science fiction, in which the story is used to explore a situation. In general the most memorable and outstanding science fiction stories are the longer ones—especially the novels. This has been true throughout most of the history of science fiction and is still true. As an editor I read a much vaster percentage of sf than is published here, and I can state categorically that the short story is not only the weakest form in which to write sf, it is also the most difficult to execute well. Most short sf stories are gadget stories, intellectual-puzzle stories like their mystery counterparts. But to the extent that a short story does not allow the author room to explore the unique situation he has developed, does not allow him to fully characterize his protagonists, or otherwise restricts him, the story will be less than three-dimensional in scope and effect.

That this is most often the case can be established simply by reading the year's published short sf stories—as various editors of

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"Year's Best" anthologies must do. I have talked with several of these editors and I've noted a common complaint: all are very discouraged by the general state of the sf short story. Each feels that he had to wade through mountains of disappointing stories to find the few he regarded as worthy of appearing in a "Best" anthology. And these editors are not reading unsolicited, unpublished submissions; they are winnowing the *already published* stories—the stories which appeared, for the most part, in the sf magazines.

Well, what excuse has an editor—like me—for publishing so many inferior stories?

Just this: they are the best available.

In each and every case, the author is struggling to say something worthwhile and of value in too short a space. Sometimes the author is aware of this; sometimes he is blind to it. But writers go right on turning out short stories, both because they want to and because they know that editors are so desperate for half-way good short sf that they are more likely to buy a short story (of publishable quality) than anything else.

Why do we editors continue to buy shorter stories when, if quality was our only criteria, we'd stick with stories of at least 10,000 words and preferably with novels? Because many of our readers—like John Schmidt—demand the shorter lengths. Because they are interested in the *number* of stories in a magazine and not in their intrinsic quality.

Let's go back to John's letter. He found little to read in the June AMAZING, because "there was nothing but two serials already started." (In fact, one of those serials was "The Enchanted Duplicator," an allegory of fandom which was running in *The Clubhouse*, and was a bonus to the regular fiction.) The serial in question was Jack Vance's *Trullion: Alastor 2262*, and the installment in that issue was the second half which, with the synopsis, could be read as a complete unit. It occupied more than half the total wordage of fiction and will probably be the best-remembered work to appear in that issue. But John didn't read it. Why? Because he dislikes serials.

John is not the only reader who dislikes serials; my mail has always been divided on the subject. We publish serials, frankly, because in most cases the novels in question are the best sf we can get, and I want to publish the best sf I can.

Had John been less prejudiced against serials, *qua* serials, he would have found a lot more to read in both magazines, and, I would think, a lot more entertainment for his money.

A RELATED POINT is the question of price and number of pages. I haven't checked out the mystery magazines lately, but it's my impression that for your 75¢ you will get no more pages than 60¢ buys for you here. And it is also likely that the actual wordage per page is

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less. Among the sf magazines 75¢ buys you more pages and resultantly more fiction. How much longer this condition will prevail I cannot say. The price and number of pages in this magazine is a matter of policy set by the publisher and not under my control. However, the publisher is faced with an inexorable economic squeeze. On the one hand prices continue to spiral up. Our typesetting costs, for instance, have been more than doubled in the last six months, making it financially impossible to continue using 8 point type for our features and 9 point type for our stories. Indeed, a page set in 9 point type costs 50% more than a page set in 10 point type; a fact which has forced us to go to 10 point type for everything, beginning with this issue. As usual the features and not the stories will suffer from this forced reduction in our total wordage per issue.

We have considered raising the price of this magazine to 75¢ and increasing the number of pages, but the present rate of inflation is such that we will probably be forced to raise our price *without* increasing the number of pages. Yet it has been a matter of record that with every price rise this magazine has lost circulation—usually at least 10,000 copies. If we lost that many sales we would be forced out of business; we simply haven't that large a sales margin left.

This leaves us in an uncomfortable bind. Each month we pay more for paper, printing, typesetting and related publishing expenses. Each month our operating budget grows tighter. Sooner or later we will be forced to take some form of action. About the best I can do is to keep you posted about the situation. I have tried, throughout my nearly five years with FANTASTIC and her sister magazine, to level with you, the readers, about the realities of this business and the various forces at work which create the problems with which we must deal. I will continue to do so.

In the meantime, John, I suggest that you pick up on our two bi-monthly companion magazines, *Science Fiction Adventures* and *Thrilling Science Fiction*. They are reprint magazines and the stories they publish run from ten to twenty-five years in age, but every story is complete and there are, on the average, as many stories per issue as you'll find in the mystery magazines. (I do not edit the reprint magazines, but to the extent that they are a profitable undertaking they help to underwrite this magazine.) If you want *more stories*, that's one additional source.

OUR POLICY ON SERIALS has never been rigid, and as a consequence a curious coincidence is the fact that we haven't published a serial here recently. Last issue we published Jack Dann's "Junction" complete in one issue. This issue the lead novella is Howard Myers' "The Earth of Nenkunal," and next issue we'll lead off with Richard Snead's "The Kozmic Kid." As it happens

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we've been very fortunate in finding a number of fantasy novellas each of which can occupy the space normally taken up by an installment of a serial.

Richard Snead's "The Kozmic Kid" is a novella of which I am particularly proud—it is, I think, as strong and as distinctive in its own way as Dann's "Junction." It represents Snead's first sale within the sf field and I expect we'll be seeing a good deal more of him in the years to come—both within our genre and in the mainstream as well. Also coming next issue: "Black Hawk of Valkarth," a Thongor adventure by Lin Carter. Something for everyone—so stay with us; 1974 looks to be FANTASTIC's best year yet!

—TED WHITE

The Interview (cont. from page 97)

threatened to stain the carpet. I'd be mashed for sure, even without a pink slip. I rummaged in my pockets for a handkerchief, and came up with the second scrap of paper that had dropped from dossier.

Dear Cee,
If waiver signed, chances of applicant's success only 47%. All company policies up to date. Wife your beneficiary. Sult!!

While I was reading, the door opened. The doorway was jammed with pretty faces, all beaming.

"Gratulations!" The brunette, still chewing, looked down at the interviewer. "See y'passed the third test. That's the one that counts." She took my limp hand and shook it.

"Then that means—"

"You're gonna get your job. *Sult.*"

"What?"

"Oh yeah, you don't . . . that means kind of a cross between *watch your step* and *go.* Don't worry, you'll learn all that crap," she said.

I supposed I would.

THEY TRAINED ME thoroughly but efficiently, so that in only a few weeks I was ready to begin. I was nervous, since it was the greatest responsibility I'd ever had.

My intercom buzzed.

"Yes?"

"Fellow by the name of Eee, waiting requisite period. In position circa thirty seconds."

"Okay." I turned on the tape recorder and positioned the paperweight on the mark. At the prescribed moment I opened the office door. I spotted the applicant, off guard, peering at our decoy with the fur panties.

"What are *you* looking at, Eee?" I said with a straight face. "Come in, man, come in!"

I was proud of my new office, just renovated, made even quieter than before by an extra layer of acoustic tiles on the door.

"I am the interviewer," I said, "of course."

—J. J. RUSS

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...According to You

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to According To You, *Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046.*

Dear Ted,

Cory and I have just been looking back over the course of our column in FANTASTIC, and that has led us to take a closer look at the issues of AMAZING and FANTASTIC that we have from the years of your editorship and before. Whether or not you are recognized and rewarded with a Hugo Award for your work, you have been a good editor. You have produced a competitive product on non-competitive resources. That has taken hard work, personal sacrifice, and much love on your part. Your work is perhaps most evident in the covers of your magazine, which I know you lay out yourself. They are an immeasurable improvement over the covers that AMAZING and FANTASTIC presented before your editorship. The difference will be immediately apparent if the time should come when you leave the magazines.

Another evidence of your work as an editor is "Junction", the short novel by Jack Dann that you just printed. Cory and I have been looking forward to reading the story since you suggested in the April issue of FANTASTIC that it illustrated the changes that Cory and I saw coming upon science fiction. And you were right, Ted. That story is a harbinger. It is crude and unpolished and clumsy—just as much of the exciting new work we will be seeing soon will be crude, unpolished and clumsy. But, ultimately, it is a powerful story. You recognized that fact—and I cannot imagine any other current editor of science fiction doing as much. If Jack Dann lives up to the promise of "Junction", he will have much to thank you for, and so will science fiction.

You speak sometimes to your friends of giving up professional sf editing—which has not been financially rewarding—and taking up a more satisfying occupation. Now I have never heard you play the saxophone, so I don't know how you would actually prosper as a professional musician. I do know

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about your abilities as a science fiction editor. Cory and I are convinced that exciting and rewarding work, as good as "Junction" and even better, will soon be appearing regularly in science fiction. It will take editors like you, Ted, to recognize and encourage it. I hope you will have the opportunity—or will be able to make the opportunity—and that you will have the resources and the rewards you deserve.

ALEXEI PANSHIN
Open Gate Farm
Perkasie, Pa., 18944

Thanks. In fact my greatest reward has been the opportunity to publish stories of which I was proud—like "Junction" and also like "The Son of Black Morca" by Alexei & Cory Panshin.—TW

Dear Ted White,
I received the Sept. 73 FANTASTIC the other day and sat down with it immediately to read the conclusion of "The Son of Black Morca." The novel impressed me so that I feel impelled to write and comment on it.

In the first *SF in Dimension* column, Alexei Panshin said: "What we are used to thinking of as fantasy is a conscious recreation of myths and symbols that are no longer believed, but merely expected to entertain . . . . But this is not the only possible fantasy. Fantasy can be disciplined and creative and relevant."

With "The Son of Black Morca," Alexei and Cory Panshin have proven this point. "Morca" is a disciplined, superbly crafted piece of fiction. The prose was a joy to read: original, clean, crisp and fresh. I am particularly pleased to be able to describe the prose as being "fresh," as too much fantasy is written in an artificial, highfalutin, fustian style; for the most part, the Panshins clearly avoid this, and the closest they come is in the confrontation between Giles and Arngrim on Stone Heath. The scene in chapter 16, at the beginning of Part III, where Haldane and Oliver confront Arngrim and Ivor, is brilliantly written. The scene in the woodcutter's hut in chapter 10, where Haldane, foggy-headed, half-listens as the grandmother promises to tell the young girl a story, convinced me in a way few scenes in fiction have managed to convince me.

"The Son of Black Morca" is a brilliantly creative novel. Haldane's process of self-realization is, of course, the stuff of the novel, and it was a pleasure to experience the Panshins' highly original handling of the matter. The depiction of change of change-of-consciousness in "Morca" is graphic, clear, and emotionally telling. And so the Panshins' experiment in creating valid new symbols is a very successful one.

The relevancy of "The Son of Black Morca" is, I believe, unique. In their *SF in Dimension* column in the Feb. 73 FANTASTIC, the Panshins said that Cyril Kornbluth, in 1957, proposed that the real subject of SF is the individual's rela-

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tionship to his family and to the raw universe, rather than the individual's relationship to society. "Morca" is, in part, a demonstration and test of this idea; and in my opinion, a confirmation of it. I must necessarily measure the success of "Morca's" relevancy by my most personal reaction to the novel, and so my reaction might not be shared by others; but I loved "The Son of Black Morca," for its depiction of Haldane's change-in-consciousness is similiar to one I underwent myself. I am convinced that "Morca" will continue to be read for many, many years, because the self-realization Haldane experiences is a thing common to people of any time.

In essence, what the Panshins set out to do in "The Son of Black Morca" was to make emotionally real to their readers a basic confrontation between a man, alone, and the universe. Haldane comes to terms with the dreams his father had for him, and with the power of the Gets. But basically, less specifically, Haldane comes to terms with the changing world in which he lives. And the beautiful, powerful way in which the Panshins portray this change left me emotionally sated, and caused me to write (as I realize now) this letter of appreciation, both to the Panshins and to you, Ted, for publishing the novel.

Addendum: I have read and enjoyed Alexei Panshin's fiction for several years now, and now have read Alexei's and Cory's work under their joint byline, but I have never seen anything signed solely by Cory Panshin. Has she never written anything herself? If she has, where and under what name did it appear? Thanks for any information you may have.

ROBERT SCHMIDT
10430 Prune Tree Lane
Cupertino, Ca. 95014

To my knowledge, Cory has published primarily in the fanzines of the last decade under her maiden name, Cory Seidman. She and Alexei have one of the closest husband/wife writing partnerships I've ever personally witnessed, but most of the typing is Alexei's . . . —TW

Dear Ted,

I just finished the Panshins' "Son of Black Morca" and in my own humble opinion I thought it was sheer greatness. Haldane's situation was so much like my own. As a handicapped person with Cerebral Palsey, I've had to learn to do things on my own. To avoid falling back on my parents. I'm doing quite well and am hopeful of some form of employment from Mass. Rehab. Also I'm looking for some female companionship but have been unsuccessful. (If there are any female sf or fantasy freaks who live around the Boston area I'd appreciate hearing from someone. They can write at the address below or call 623-7250). If the above doesn't meet with your approval you can always cut it out, Ted. I won't mind.

Getting back to FANTASTIC, Sept.

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73 I must say that I love the cover. Has Joe Staton worked for the comics industry? [*Yes.*—TW] His stuff seems familiar.

The short fiction was fairly good, particularly the Eklund and Malzberg pieces. I can see where "The Stuff of Time" was suited more for FANTASTIC than AMAZING simply because of the method of time travelling used in the story. More fantasy involved rather than hard science.

Janet Fox did alright with "A Witch in Time." (It seems to me, Ted, that some issues of your mags have contained two stories that were similar as far as subject matter. Examples such as "The Stuff of Time" and "A Witch in Time" in this issue and in the Feb. 73 issue of FANTASTIC, "Nightmare Syndrome" and "As Dreams Are Made On." I'm not really griping. Just curious.) I hope we see more of Arcana. Bunch's story was o.k. as was "The Nights of Dreadful Silence," "AFC" and Diomede's interesting "Dem Bones."

It's good to see Fritz Leiber back again with his book column. After reading that review of Hauntings I'll have to see about getting it from the SF Book Club.

I hope my letters are getting better. I was very scared in the beginning but now I seem to have gotten over it. I can't move about as well as I like and I *have* a few good friends but I need companionship and I wish to make new friends. And since I've been a long time SF nut I thought that maybe I should write to the magazines in the hopes of communication with other fans. Please forgive any mistakes made. I'm not that good a typist. You'll be hearing from me again, soon.

RAYMOND J. BOWIE JR.
31 Everett Avenue
Somerville, Mass., 02145

The similarities you noted were in the titles *more than the* stories. *At one time an editor was expected to change at least one of the titles if two were similar in a single issue. I think today's readers are both intelligent enough and sophisticated enough to accept any accidental coincidences in titles, so long as the stories themselves don't overlap.* — TW

Dear Ted White,

John Carl's letter on "Vampire of the Void" being a reprint recalled to me the amusement I felt on reading your blurb calling this tale "archetypically British" and caused me to speculate on a possible connection between my reaction and the story's questionable age.

In his early stories to American magazines, Russell tried (and succeeded) in making his stories as much like the native product as possible; he wrote in a "hardboiled" somewhat slangy manner, half the dialogue consisting of wisecracks, and he never used a British expression where an American one would fit.

Such slanting is surely now obsolete, especially since the emphasis on style in recent years and the printing in the U.S. of highly in-

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dividualistic British stories from *New Worlds*.

Since Russell's story is so slanted, I must assume that "Vampire" is one of his early works. "Vampire" is, I regret to say, as archetypically British as hamburger and Coke;—e.g. for "bus" Russell says "street-car", for "railway" he says "railroad" and he describes a policeman's truncheon as a nightstick. Further, a corpse is not a cadaver, a police car is not a cruiser, and if we have any police captains they have been locked up somewhere in a dark cellar along with the lieutenants—I've never seen one of either. My conclusion, therefore, is that this is not a new story. But still enjoyable. All of which proves, no doubt, that as a literary detective I'm bloody useless.

A brief comment on Lester Boutillier's letter, specifically his comments on Poul Anderson's "far right" writings—I originally intended to criticise him for a somewhat selfrighteous attitude in automatically assuming that Anderson's right wing views marred his fiction. A few seconds thought, however, made me realize myself guilty of the same things I would have accused Lester of. I can remember intending to write you of what I considered to be John Brunner's extreme left-wing crankiness as manifested in "Dramaturges of Yan" and "Wrong End of Time." In all fairness, then, all I can do is echo Lester's view that there's something to be said for a genre that can hold people with such diversity of views.

Finally, thanks for not only producing two great magazines but, in the dawning era of the dollar-twenty-five paperbacks, for producing them at sixty cents each.

ROGER F. MARSH,
44 Macaulay Street,
Grimsby, Lincs., ENGLAND

Dear Ted,

I picked up the Sept. FANTASTIC today and thought "Aha! Another Mike Hinge cover." Then I checked the table of contents and then I really looked at the cover, and realized the style and subject matter were entirely different from Hinge. I think it was the use of color that fooled me at first glance—in fact, that's about all I saw at first glance. Keep it up and AMAZING and FANTASTIC will be as distinctive in appearance as Ballantine Books were when Powers was fresh on the stf art scene.

Obviously I haven't had time to read the stories yet. (Well, I have had *time*, but I'm a little behind on my reading; I just finished Frank Gruber's *The Pulp Jungle;* an excellent book for anyone still able to find a copy.)

I'm writing mostly to comment on Michael Girsdansky's letter, since you specifically threw it up for comments. Basically, I agree with him; *Genesis II* is a pretty bad tv offering. I had thought better of Roddenberry, but presumably he decided that there was no point in

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fighting to get halfway good science fiction on tv when the drek sells easier and lasts longer—witness *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea.* However, Michael, like so many fan critics, yourself included, managed to go well overboard once he got started and came up with a few remarkably silly statements.

Item: In one paragraph he complains because there hasn't been enough intermingling of racial customs and genes between our time and that of *Genesis,* and in the next paragraph complains equally strongly because Singh isn't a pure Sikh circa 1970, turban, pigtail and all, and later on bitches because another character has a Greek face and a Russian-sounding name. Girsdansky doesn't seem to know what he does want in the way of characters.

Item: Along with objections to sterotyped Goodies and Baddies, Michael thoughtfully mentions that his own thinking is so sterotyped that he can't think of Ted Cassidy in any role other than that of Lurch the butler. As a matter of fact, everyone to whom I've talked about the show has agreed that one of its few good points is the chance it gives Cassidy to do some acting, as opposed to standing around looking freakish. My own opinion is that Roddenberry should have put Richard Kiel in as Cassidy's mutant half-brother, or whatever—it would have made a better show but I suppose would have detracted from the ughish "hero" (whoever he is; can't recall the name at the moment, and if I'm lucky maybe I never will).

Item: "A new poetry" is quite in line with current jargon, and will probably be an accepted English critical phrase in 10 years, let alone the howevermany years elapse between 1970 and *Genesis.* If it isn't an accepted phrase already. Like it or not, language evolves, and the moulders of future English still work for the ad agencies. I assume Girsdansky doesn't like it, and I'm not too happy about it myself, but that isn't going to change anything.

Most of the rest of the criticisms are quite valid, but I might inquire what Girsdansky expects. Tv is a cheapjack medium. *Genesis II* is every bit as good as 99 per cent of the adventure series on tv, and the reason I don't ever intend to watch it again is precisely because of that fact. If it was better than the general run, I might favor it. Tv critics have been complaining for years that old movies are crowding out original material; lately I see tv writers are doing the same. The reason is quite simple; an old movie—even a grade B Saturday-afternoon-popcorn-epic—is a far superior product to the average original tv series, and therefore more viewers will watch it.

ROBERT (BUCK) COULSON
Route 3
Hartford City, In., 47348

Dear Ted;

For better or worse, the Gene R. *Genesis II* pilot was not accepted for this fall. (Though, he did score a

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tentative with *Quaestor* for one of the other networks.)

I felt the pilot was full of cliches of things that haven't showed up in science fiction for years, but it was the only SF pilot under consideration by CBS, so I would have liked it to have made it.

Though; the present concept of science fiction is still a lot of the old horror movie or space opera sort of thing. I didn't get to see *Star Trek* ever; only *Lost in Space,* which let me down about its fourth week—when it degenerated into the old standby deadend tricks.

Aside from the great TV hassle . . . .

What did AFC mean in the title of a recent story? It used the dream-into-reality gimmick real well; but its title left me wondering.

ROY J. SCHENCK
R.D. 1
Canisteo, N.Y. 14823

P.S. I never did believe those Pax people were the good guys. Since when has Establishment ever been Good, no matter how much war has happened? Anyway, SF is about mutants, isn't it? R.J.S.

Dear Ted,

Girsdansky should wise up and use Hal Clement's "Game II" method of Roddenberry criticism: imagine that Gene Roddenberry is the Walter Cronkeit of the 21st Century saying, "Carlsbad Caverns, 2043 AD, and You Are There." Treat the whole thing as a documentary where the producer has his say, the writers have their say, the actors have their say—all being amateur historians on the subject of the previous generation, and thus subject to slanting and erroneous interpretation.

Genesis II is a composite paradigm and thus subject to interpretation of error and what appears to be error. However, literary criticism or "Game I" methods are not appropriate, rather they are destructive and—even worse—archaic when applied to a TV series. The only appropriate method of TV series interpretation and criticism is "Game II." Put yourself in the place of a documentary writer or producer and imagine the historical and scientific errors they make in recreating a famous event, then time travel mentally to the 21st or 23rd Centuries to do the same for *Genesis II* or *Star Trek* respectively.

For example, it is not nitpicking to point out that it would probably take much more than 5 years to travel to Rigel at warp factor 6 (Clement says 25 years.) But perhaps the problem is semantics—5 somethingorother years and not our years, or warp factor has been underdefined. A 23rd Century historian may not understand that his terms differ in meaning from ours though we use the same words. The world of *Star Trek* is real, as is the world of *Genesis II.* We must simply overcome semantics and the confusion of bias.

As a production I would criticize *Genesis II* only for the way it unfolded—slow first half hour

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followed by a series of confusing jumps. I'm not criticizing "Game II" methodology or going away from it when I say that historians should recognize story value and the need for adroit pacing. The part where Dylan Hunt figures out he is being used to repair the power source for a missile site—and not the Tyranian city—is not shown. I asked a few Junior Engineers about this and they said that though Hunt's specialty is not given they'd assumed he was a Control Systems Engineer, or somesuch. That would explain his participation in the fateful experiment and his understanding of Tyranian intent.

As to the ability of Pax to defend itself: Girsdansky should recall that the enforcement officers from Pax were armed with guns firing anesthetic pellets, and defenses were engineered in as well for Pax overall. If he had read Roddenberry's premise (I believe that appeared in Locus) he would realize that both Pax and the Tyranians were surrounded by Balkanized States and thus unable to localize offense or defense. The idea of the series was for Dylan Hunt to visit a new sub-culture each and every episode. Skirmishes with the Tyranians were to be as common as Federation—Klingon confrontations in Star Trek. That makes for a Band-Aid method of production for an SF anthology series but the network demands continuing characters, etc.

Incidentally, NBC Monitor is broadcasting the *X-1* radio program. They've already done a show with two shorts by Ray Bradbury (not my cup of tea) and Simak comes next. Everybody should write to NBC Radio in New York to keep the series going. You can have an SF anthology series on radio, but it will be necessary to support it through letters, etc. So write soon and write often to NBC MONITOR, NBC RADIO, NEW YORK, NY. And the first thing you should criticize is the fact that the show is broadcast only every fourth Sunday at 7:30 PM EDT.

JOHN ROBINSON
1—101st Street
Troy, N.Y., 12180

Any method of criticising the creative works of men which begins with the assumption that these works are "real" and not fictitious is a method I'm afraid I couldn't respect.—TW

Dear Ted,

By the time this sees print, if it does, anyone who is interested will have had a chance to see NBC's new animated version of *Star Trek*. If any of you would like to express your feelings on the show, the address is: NBC-TV, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y., 10029.

In addition, David Gerrold says in his latest newsletter that Paramount is seriously considering a *Star Trek* movie. Encouraging letters on the subject can be sent to: Frank Yablans, Paramount Pictures, 5451 Marathon St., Los Angeles, Calif. 90038.

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Galaxy and that I would like to *reserve* a copy of the next issue, if I might. Well, they said this could be done, just leave your name and phone number and we'll call you when it comes in. Sure enough, a couple of days later I was called and told my magazine had come and would I please come to pick it up. So I went down and got it and while there I observed that I got the only copy. No others were placed on their stands. However, when I reserved further copies of the following issues, other copies also started appearing on their stands. Now I no longer have to reserve a copy. I can walk in and pick a copy off their stands, as they now receive and display *Galaxy* regularly. I don't know how well this system of reserving copies will work in a large city or with newstands, (with newstands I doubt it) but it works fine in local variety stores in small towns.

In a recent letter by Lester Boutillier, published in one of your magazines, he mentioned waiting for a new magazine to come out. Which one is he refering to, *The Haunt Of Horror* or *Vertex?* Rumour has it that Canada may be getting a science fiction magazine of its own. Probably just that; a rumour. Was someone saying something about the days of the SF magazines being over?

ED MILEWSKI
289 Gervais St.
Midland, Ont., L4R 4C6
CANADA

No, I haven't entirely stopped writing fiction, as you'll note from the contents page of this issue. My reason for including "A Trip to the City" by Keith Laumer in The Best From Fantastic *although it originally appeared in AMAZING is, very simply, that I considered it the best fantasy he had written—and I still contend that it always belonged in FANTASTIC. As for new magazines, the latest report has it that Gerry Conway's* The Haunt of Horror *folded after two issues, the victim of a publisher who was unwilling to make a real commitment to the magazine (the number of magazines which succeeded within the first two issues can be counted on the fingers of one hand).*—TW

Dear Ted—or, should I say, his *imposter,*

Today I bought my first issue of FANTASTIC and was astonished less by the stories than your name—Ted White! That's because about three years ago in *Newfangles* or in another such fanzine, I read the tragic news that Mr. White had died in an automobile accident! I doubt that the present editorials are posthumous, since it's been much too long after his death for there to be left-overs.

The only conclusion is that "Ted White" is an imposter!

Reason for the impersonation: Simple. The name "Ted White" was retained because the publisher worried that White's death would result in loss of readership. An absurd idea you may think—but such

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Keep on Trekkin'.

DAVID TAGGART
Chandler Road
White River Junction
Vermont, 05001

Girsdansky's criticisms of Genesis II *generated a good deal more mail, of which the foregoing letters are only a representative sample. Generally speaking, readers agreed with Girsdansky's overall dissatisfaction, but took exception to some of his specifics.*—TW

Dear Ted,

I'm glad to see you're still writing. For a while there I thought you had given it up, not seeing any new work of yours around. By this I'm, of course, refering to your story "Dandy", which appears in Roger Elwood's all new anthology *Demon Kind*. I believe it to be one of the better stories in the book. Also, I found it better than many of your stories that you published in AMAZING and FANTASTIC a while back.

Here are some more comments on the September FANTASTIC. It seems to me that the slush pile stories you publish, have lately been superior to your solicited stories. For example, the best three stories in current issue of FANTASTIC, (This doesn't include the novel) I found were "The Nights of Dreadful Silence" by Glen Cook, "A Witch In Time" by Janet Fox and "The Stuff Of Time" by Gordon Eklund. It's the first time that I've come across either Cook or Fox anywhere so I would assume their stories came from the slush pile. But then perhaps I'm wrong and you know these people and solicited their stories. As for "Dem Bones," by J.K. Diomede, erase a half dozen words and it no longer fits in your magazine. "AFC" by Karl Pflock was ridiculous, corny, just pure rubbish. This is perhaps the worst story I've read in FANTASTIC for a long time.

The Best From Fantastic has shown up. I'm happy to say it's receiving much better circulation or rather distribution than *The Best From Amazing* did. Though Manor Books did a somewhat better job on this book, it still deserved much better handling that it did receive. I have a gripe. The book is titled *The Best From Fantastic*, so what is the last story in the book doing there? Irregardless of editorial oversight, this story was first published in AMAZING and therefore does not belong in *The Best From Fantastic*. In all those issues of FANTASTIC there must have been at least one story you could have chosen instead of this one from AMAZING.

Here is perhaps a way to increase circulation of your magazine. I presently have no trouble getting your magazines, but for a while I did have trouble getting copies of *Galaxy*. There was a store in my home town that did get copies of it perhaps once or twice a year. I didn't want to subscribe to *Galaxy*, so I went to this particular store and mentioned to one of the proprietors that sometimes they get this particular magazine called

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impersonations have been done with other celebrities.

Of course, there might have been another reason, in which case I would like to hear it from "you."

MASAO KONO
P.O. Box 642
Kapaa, Kauai, Hawaii 96746

Reports of my death are not only exaggerated, they are—as nearly as I can tell—non-existent. I mentioned your letter to Maggie Thompson, co-editor/publisher of Newfangles, at the recent Midwescon, and she assured me no such report had ever been published, either seriously or in jest, in the Thompsons' fanzine. If *you're* serious, I suggest you recheck your reports for a possible confusion of names.—TW

Dear Ted,

As a recent but voracious reader of FANTASTIC, I admire the candor, receptivity, and pragmatism of your editing. The character of the magazine strikes me as unique though, if you'll pardon my hubris, not fully realized: I understand that, with such a small circulation, you must treat suggestions gingerly albeit, for the same reason, may sustain a vital rapport and command a certain loyalty. Hence, I commend these impressions to your disposal in all sincerity.

The peculiar niche in the pulp pantheon that FANTASTIC begins to fill seems that of a contemporary counterpart to the "Adult Fantasy" (Unicorn's Head) classics Ballantine Books publishes.

Throughout most of my youth I devoured sf omnivorously, but since I came upon E.R. Eddison, I consume only work compound of grace and inner compulsion. To contrast "true" fantasy with "false" fantasy must seem utterly fatuous to many, yet I believe much hinges thereon. To illustrate, consider the resurrection of Conan at the hands of deCamp and Carter. Despite its bluntness, Steve Riley's castigation of their Frankenstein deserves better than a petulant rebuff. (I appreciate that elsewhere it might not get a hearing.) Seeking to mimic Howard to a fault, they have, I fear, sunk into bombast: And, whereas we might forgive them any excess (much as we indulged Howard's own lapses) so they risked a kindred possession, how can we abide a mere sensational reproduction of an emotional entity? The difference between "Black Colossus" or "A Witch Shall Be Born," and "Black Sphinx of Nebthu" is emphatically in no wise technical, but rather in the thunderclap *conviction* wherewith the authentic Conan plunges into his fate, heedless of our incredulity (and of Howard's as well, I imagine). Mayhap deCamp and Carter do better singly because visions shy away from camaraderie, to waylay the soul in extremis, leaving to other, social faculties the embarrassing task of conciliation to the public palate.

At any event, please note that I mean no denigration of their talents hereby: I follow each new in-

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stallment avidly, marvelling at their ear for Howard's nuance, their submission to his milieu—and their steadfast insusceptibility thereto.

I hope I have cast more light than heat upon that ideal the Panshins so bravely declared, and toward which it pleases me to suppose we all strive—the rebirth, or radical unfurlment of our own psyche, whence flows the wonder for whose sake we invade world after world.

STEVE PRUSINSKAS
117½ Keith St.
Norman, Oklahoma, 73069

Heartburn (cont. from page 114)

are thankful. A virtual task, an enemy dirt to polish, polish, polish, polish into oblivion.) And then rise eagerly on the morning to find the ungolden bowl of food. "What's for dinner, Mom?"

"Food."

"What, again?"

What do *real* people eat?

Haven't written anything in weeks. It's all right, don't get punished for that anymore. Sometimes I do write, a line or two, and the next day there isn't even any paper with the food, only sometimes. Okay. Long as I have my Scrubbi pad. Trusty old Scrubbi pad.

GETS ME MAD when I just about finish polishing the house and F comes in tracking his filth. I told him to stay out unless I invite him. Little enough privacy down here. Not that I'm punished for his dirt. They know I did my job. But it's the principle, him making me more work.

F asked me if I'm still writing. Said not so much. He smiled and nodded. Punched me on the arm conspiratorially. Bet he went through the same thing once. Or else he *is* a damn collaborator.

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F SAID WE OUGHT to take half our food and go see S or W or B or L (the last a redhead). He poked me in the ribs and chuckled. I hadn't finished polishing for the day.

I POLISH BETTER than they do. They do those long, swooping strokes, leave streaks. Little circles are better. Doesn't make any difference to *Them*, though. But have to keep *some* standards.

STRANGE. First paper in nearly forty days. Don't know what to say.

NEW PERSON over in the Teapot Dome tunnel.

—SUSAN DOENIM

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